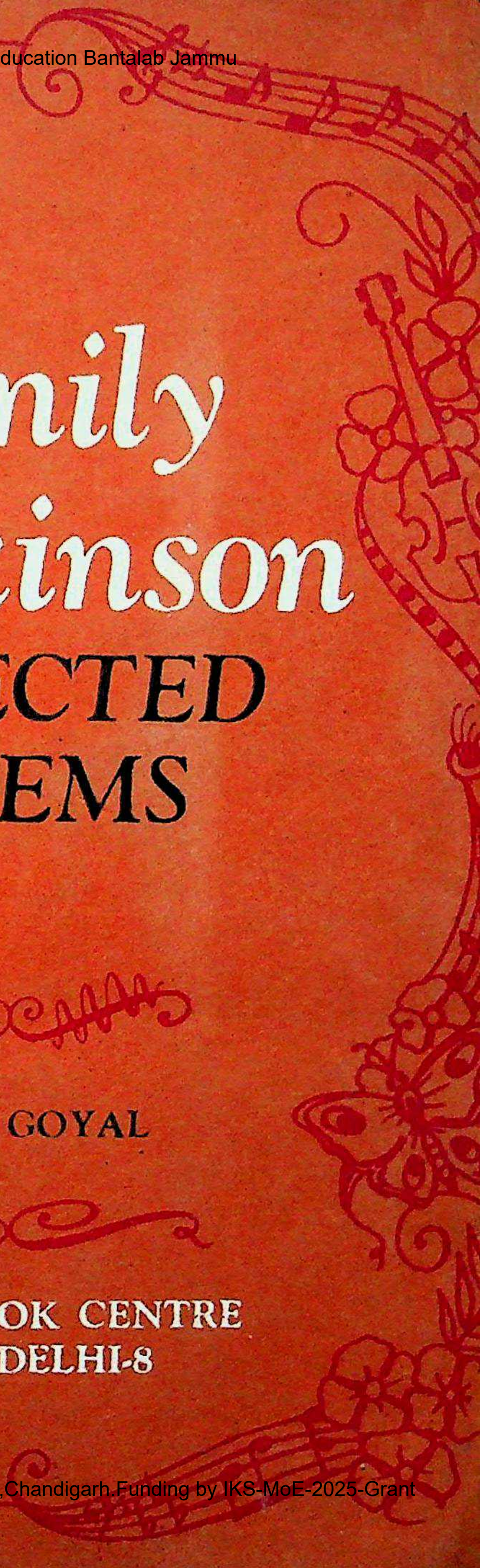

Emily Dickinson
SELECTED POEMS

DR. B. S. GOYAL

AARTI BOOK CENTRE
NEW DELHI-8

Studies in American Literature

EMILY DICKINSON

SELECTED POEMS

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EMILY DICKINSON

SELECTED POEMS

By

B. S. GOYAL, M. A., Ph. D.

Head of the Department of English

S. D. College, Ghaziabad

FIFTH EDITION

86

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PREFACE TO THE FIFTH EDITION

It is indeed a matter for gratification that the Fourth Edition of this book was so well received by the student community necessitating the bringing out of the Fifth Edition. Once again the demand for the Fifth Edition of this book within a remarkably short period is a sufficient proof that it has proved more useful to the students than many other books on the subject already available in the market.

The coming out of the Fifth Edition of this book on Emily Dickinson's *Selected Poems* is a matter of great pride for the publishers who are highly thankful to the student community for their warm reception accorded to the earlier editions of this book. It is hoped that the Fifth Edition in its present form and get-up will prove still more useful to the student community.

New Delhi

November 1986 **Publishers**

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

The present critical study of Emily Dickinson's selected poems has been specially designed for students offering the paper on American Literature at post-graduate level. The book includes practically everything that the students require for a successful pursuit of their studies. Emily Dickinson's poetry is at many places obscure and difficult to understand and interpret. It was, therefore, felt that the students needed a compact edition which could provide them detailed explications of prescribed poems, critical material on various aspects of her art and vision, select literary criticism, and finally, selected critical questions with answers. The book contains all these, as also a chronology and a select bibliography which will be of immense value to the more inquisitive readers of Emily Dickinson's poetry. It is hoped that the book will prove useful to those for whom it is meant.

It is my pleasure to thank the publishers, Messrs Aarti Book Centre, New Delhi, for bringing out the present edition after careful planning and discussion.

Ghaziabad
February 1974 **B. S. GOYAL**

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Or

2. Emily Dickinson's poetry at its most mature continually proclaims that "to lose or forego what we desire is somehow to gain." Amplify and illustrate.

Or

3. Emily Dickinson repeatedly asserted the paradox that "privation is more plentiful than plenty; that to renounce is to possess the more." Illustrate with reference to the poems read by you. 174

4. "The poems of Emily Dickinson are a continual appeal to experience, motivated by an arrogant passion for the truth." Discuss.

Or

5. Emily Dickinson's chief truthfulness lay in her insistence on discovering the facts of her inner experience. In what form is this truthfulness reflected in her poetry ?

Or

6. "Emily Dickinson's poetry, with its articulate faithfulness to inner and outer truth, its insistence on maximum consciousness, is not an avoidance of life but an eccentric mastery of it". Amplify. 179

7. Emily Dickinson's "precision of vocabulary and condensed statement anticipated twentieth century." Discuss.

Or

8. "Meanings in miniatures". Does this phrase fairly describe Emily Dickinson's handling of words in her poetry ?

Or

9. Emily Dickinson "attempted to develop a shorthand system of poetic language which would combine the advantage of conciseness with the capability of connoting a rich complex of suggestions." Discuss.

Or

10. "The most evident characteristic of words, as far as Emily Dickinson was concerned, is their startling vitality". Do you agree ?

Or

11. In Emily Dickinson's poems there is "only the over-powering immediacy of the piercing word". Elaborate with illustrations.

Or

12. "The great problem is to get the sound sense into words that must live alone". How does Emily Dickinson solve this problem in her poetry ?

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13. "The contrasted seeds of mysticism and Stoicism, took root in Emily's mind not only because of her own personality, but through a congenial ground prepared for them by romantic sensibility." Discuss and amplify.

Or

14. "Although she distrusted Romanticism, she was too shrewd to discard it altogether." How far does this statement apply to Emily Dickinson's practice as a poet ?

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16. Emily Dickinson was a recluse. What stamp of this fact do you find on the theme and range of her poems ?

Or

17. Write a brief essay on Emily Dickinson as a poet of alienation and disintegration.

Or

18. "Confusion and order are the polarities of Emily Dickinson's world view." Discuss with reference to the poems read by you.

Or

19. "Emily Dickinson's physical seclusion was a sign of her emotional and psychological withdrawal." What evidence of this withdrawal do you find in her poetry ?

Or

20. Emily Dickinson "did not reject life in its more permanent aspect ; she withdrew in order to apprehend it more fully and with greater concentration of purpose." Do you agree ? 190

21. "Time and change proved peculiarly disturbing to Emily Dickinson because she regarded them as autonomous processes which belied—or at least concealed—every fixed principle except their own autonomy". Discuss with reference to the poems read by you.

Or

22. "Out of her aversion to time and change, there emerge the darkest moments in Emily Dickinson's poetry". Do you agree ?

Or

23. "The real problem of the momentous transition lies, precisely, in the metaphysical uncertainties which time and change are constantly occasioning." Discuss Emily Dickinson's time poetry in the light of this observation.

Or

24. "In the time poetry, the movement of the momentous transition is always towards the negative : towards darkness, Fall, or the dissipation of light". Discuss with reference to Emily Dickinson's poetry.

Or

25. "Clocks and hours, days, months, and seasons, the images and the increments of time : these are Emily Dickinson's harbingers of woe". Amplify. 197

26. In *A Light Exits in Spring* "seasonal change is employed as the concrete symbol of the moral change". Explain it and discuss whether the lyric is an allegory or just a case of Pathetic Fallacy.

Or

27. In *A Light Exits in Spring* "the intense dramatic impact is largely a result of our perception that the passing of light is portrayed as small sign of the still larger impermanence which exists always and everywhere and on a cosmic scale". Discuss.

Or

28. *A Light Exits in Spring* "presents change as inherently terrifying, because mutability is at once 'an inexplicable fact' and yet the basic and essential component of every human experience". Amplify.

Or

29. *A Light Exits in Spring* "deals with the inexplicable fact of change, of the absolute clevage between successive states of being..." Examine critically. 201

30. "Despite her affinities with the transcendentalists and the metaphysicals, and the imagists, and the modernists, Emily Dickinson belongs to no school and has no followers". Elaborate with references and illustrations.

Or

31. "Emily Dickinson shares the appeal of poets who create their own techniques, moulding language to the requirements of their personal voice without regard to literary convention". Discuss.

Or

32. "Emily Dickinson wrote, as if nobody had written poetry before her". Amplify and illustrate. **203**

33. Write a critical note on Emily Dickinson's ironic style.

Or

34. "In Emily Dickinson's poetry irony functions as a constant and pervasive theme, and, inevitably, the ironic outlook came to affect her poetic style". Discuss.

Or

35. "Emily Dickinson shied away from rhetorical devices because most forms of the rhetorical were totally at odds with her ironic patterns of thought". Elaborate and illustrate.

Or

36. "Emily Dickinson's ironical sensibility is also manifested in certain of the strictly formal features of her poetry". Do you agree ? **207**

37. What did Emily Dickinson mean when she said that her business was Circumference ? Elaborate your answer with suitable illustrations.

Or

38. "Circumference represented the farthest boundary of human experience, where two modes of being touched, where that which was circle pressed that which was beyond". Apply this statement to Emily Dickinson's concept of Circumference.

Or

39. "In the complexity of its operation Circumference could perform the complementary functions of extension and enclosure, of release from self and determination of self." Elucidate with reference to Emily Dickinson's use of the term "Circumference".

Or

40. "To explore *Circumference* would be at once to explore her own unknown limits and to explore the mysteries of life and death, of Immortality and the Possible, of finite, existence immersed in the infinite ; to explore these mysteries by means of intuition and poetic imagination, the only way, she was sure, they could profitably be explored". Discuss with reference to Emily Dickinson's poetry. **211**

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1

Emily Dickinson's Life and Works

Birth of a Saint of Art

Although her stature in American letters is great, Emily Dickinson's story is uncommonly barren of events and modest in pretensions. The example of her life has nevertheless made her one of the saints of art and one of the eponymous legends of national history of America. She was born on December 10, 1830, in a New England where Puritanism was dying and literature was just coming to life. Her birthplace was Amherst, a quiet village in the Connecticut Valley of Massachusetts, nearly a hundred miles from Concord and Cambridge in space, and at least fifty years in time. Here she lived a life, outwardly uneventful, inwardly dedicated to a secret and self-imposed assignment—the mission of writing a "letter to the world" that would express, in poems of absolute truth and of the utmost economy, her concepts of life and death, of love and nature, and of what Henry James called "the landscape of the soul."

Family of the Sensitive Rebel

From her family Emily had love without understanding. Her father, leading lawyer of the village, and, in later life, treasurer of Amherst College and member of the legislature and of Congress, dominated the household. "His heart was pure and terrible", Emily wrote after his death in 1874, "and I think no other like it exists." Her gentle, colourless mother lived in his shadow. Austin, the only son, patterned himself on his father but lacked the formidable, self-righteousness of the old Puritan. Lavinia, crotchety and outspoken, was watchdog and protector of her shy, sensitive, and sometimes rebellious sister. The family lived in a brick mansion set in spacious grounds on Amherst's main street, and neither sister ever married.

Education and Personality

After two years at Amherst Academy and one at the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, Emily Dickinson settled down to the customary life of a New England village. Many years later a school friend remembered her as "not beautiful, yet she had great beauties. Her eyes were lovely auburn, soft and warm, her hair lay in rings of the same colour all over her head, and her skin and teeth were fine. She had a demure manner which brightened easily into fun where she felt at home, but among strangers she was rather shy, silent, and even deprecating. She was exquisitely neat and careful in her dress.

and always had flowers about her. She was one of the wits of the school, and there were no signs in her life and character of the future recluse."

Influence of Humphrey and Newton

Into her life during these years came two young men who may have had some slight influence on her career : Leonard Humphrey, principal of Amherst Academy, and Benjamin F. Newton, a law student in her father's office. Both stimulated her interest in books; Newton encouraged her to write. Both died young and were remembered in the lines :

I never lost as much but twice,
And that was in the sod;
Twice I have stood a beggar
Before the door of God !

The Reticent Poet

Reticence was a Dickinson characteristic, and most of what we know or surmise about Emily's emotional life comes by inference from her poems and letters. Sometime during her twenties she had begun seriously to write poetry ; just when cannot be known because her early poems were destroyed, or are unidentifiable as such. By 1858 she was copying her poems in ink and gathering them together in little packets, loosely bound by thread. In that year she appears to have written fifty-two poems. In 1862 there was an astonishing total of three hundred and fifty-six. In 1865 the number had fallen off to eighty-five, and thereafter averaged about twenty a year.

Wadsworth and the Creative Explosion

The fuse that touched off the creative explosion of the early sixties appears to have been a Philadelphia clergyman : Charles Wadsworth, forty-one years old, a husband and a father when Emily Dickinson met him in May, 1855, while on her way home from a visit to her father in Washington. Correspondence must have followed since drafts of three letters to him—letters pathetically eager and pleading, in which the writer calls herself "Daisy" and the recipient "Master"—were found among Emily Dickinson's papers after her death.

Whether Wadsworth responded to, or was alarmed by, the intensity of the emotion he inspired, as evidenced by these drafts and by certain of her poems, cannot be determined, since his letters were destroyed. But it is known that he called on her in 1860, while visiting a friend in nearby Northampton. And it is conjectured that sometime during the following year he told her that soon he would have "left the land", having accepted a call to a church in San Francisco. The shock of separation may account for the prodigious output of 1862. "I had a terror since September, I could tell to none," she wrote in that year, "and so I sing, as the boy does by the burying ground, because I am afraid." And this is the loss to which the last two lines of the poem quoted above must refer :

Angels, twice descending,
Reimbursed my store.
Burglar, banker, father,
I am poor once more !

As George F. Whicher observed : "Her dream-palace was suddenly left tenantless." In that same year Emily Dickinson seems to have considered, for the first time, the possibility of publication, for she sent four poems to T.W. Higginson, a rising young man of letters, with a note asking him to "say if my verse is alive."

Withdrawal from the Outer World

If one may think of the first decade of Emily Dickinson's adult life as a period of expansion to the creative climax of 1862, then the remaining years marked a gradual retreat. Year by year the area of her interests narrowed ; year by year her indifference to the outer world grew more arctic. Now she dressed only in white ; ventured less and less, and finally not at all, from her home ; saw fewer friends, and, at last, none. But with one curious exception. Judge Otis P. Lord of Salem, a widower in his late sixties and an old family friend, visited Amherst often during these years, and it would appear —on the evidence of surviving drafts of fifteen letters written between 1878 and 1883— that she conceived for him a passionate love, and even hoped for marriage.

Last Years of the Eccentric Recluse

In these last years Emily Dickinson tended her garden, baked the family's bread, and watched from her window the passing show of village life. To her friends she sent gifts of flowers with gnomic notes and poems which vastly puzzled them. She grew obsessed with death, and as her friends departed to "that bareheaded life under the grass" she condoled with the bereaved in letters that are morbidly curious. Long before her death in 1886 she had become an Amherst legend : the woman in white ; the eccentric recluse ; the half-cracked daughter of Squire Dickinson.

Posthumous Discovery of the Poet

How closely Emily Dickinson had guarded her writing, even from her immediate family, is shown by her sister's astonishment at coming upon a locked box filled with poems. She had already burned, unread, Emily's correspondence, but these poems, the work of her dear sister, must be given to the world. First she turned to Sue Dickinson, Austin's wife, but the task was difficult and Sue was indolent. Next Lavinia solicited Mabel Loomis Todd, the brilliant young wife of an Amherst professor. Reluctantly Mrs. Todd consented to undertake the long labour of deciphering the handwriting, copying the poems, and selecting enough for a slim volume. With the help of T. W. Higginson she finished the task and found a publisher who agreed to bring out the book if the family would pay part of the cost. It appeared in 1890, and was followed by two others and by two volumes of letters. More poems were published in

1914, and again during the twenties, when their place in literature was at last recognized. Finally, in 1950 Harvard University bought all available manuscripts and publishing rights, and has since issued the complete poems and letters, each in three large volumes, edited by Thomas H. Johnson. As is inevitable for a poet who worked in solitude and without criticism, her writing is uneven, sometimes baffling in its concision, sometimes provoking in its disregard of rhymes and rules. But at her best she writes as Thoreau wished to live —close to the bone, concentrating the very essence of what she saw and felt in phrases that strike and penetrate like bullets, and with an originality of thought unsurpassed in American poetry.

2

Emily Dickinson's Personality : Myth and Reality

The Perpetual Bride

Emily Dickinson's poems tell us much about her, and what they say should be the final truth. But legend, unscrupulous of truth, tends to shape itself in the image of its makers rather than in the image of its subjects. Now nearly eighty-seven years after her death, the legend of Emily Dickinson has congealed into a shape not even the poems themselves seem able seriously to disturb. It takes its character mainly from the romantic sorrows of a vivacious, witty young woman of distinguished family who fell in love, suffered rejection, and spent the remainder of her life in a white solitude that was, in the words of George F. Whicher, "a long interval of sameness so absolute that the arrival of a new month was like a guest's coming and the closed vans of a circus passing her window at night seemed to her an Arabian experience." When Emily Dickinson became the nun in the cloisters of her father's house, enacting in her poems the bittersweet resignation of thwarted love and accepting marriage to nothing but the universe, she had unconsciously made a place for herself among the tragic heroines of drama and fiction. Her story has the necessary element that makes for legend—love at once and for all time, love as sacrifice—and she possessed the genius to transform a private circumstance into one of general relevance. When she chose to confirm her fate by dressing in the costume of a perpetual bride, she gave legend an enduring image ; and when she confided her secret in a privacy that, long after her death, her poems would destroy, she added the proper touch of irony that would complete the picture.

Her Manifold Living Interests

Legend has a way of flourishing in proportion to its degree of falsehood. Biographical scrutiny has never certified the man or men whom legend has accepted as the variously possible objects of her love, and there is good reason—on the basis of her poems as well as her recorded friendships—to believe that her emotional life was more deeply attuned to feminine attachments. Wherever the biographic truth may lie, the young poet whose personal romance grew into the famous romance of the life of Emily Dickinson is a portrait drawn from but one side of her character, one area of her living interests. The histrionic bias of the myth-makers, and the tendency of others to make a darling of an artist the world abused by ignoring, have been in effect joined in a cabal that stands somewhere between the poet and her poems. Beyond the single figure of the legend, there are several strong and distinct Emily Dickinsons. Each of the several versions of her character is amply documented in her poems. Phase by phase, they succeed merely in putting strictures upon the legend they will probably never demolish.

The Demonic Artist in Fury

Perhaps the least accountable to the public eye is the Emily Dickinson who can speak with the unassuageable fury of a Medea— the blunt self-exacerbating woman whose grief makes her grotesque. The modern critical commonplace of "tragic acceptance" does not easily apply to the persistently disconsolate mind of Emily Dickinson, but in the many instances where she subjects personal chaos to composition the term becomes relevant. Her art is primarily one of economy and control, and in glimpses like this we learn what she controlled and thereby gain insight into the denials and exclusions that shaped her verse no less rigorously than her life. Many of her finest works have the quality of outrage packed into formal dispositions of words and all but stifled in the process. In these instances we read the comparatively sane statements of a spirit half surrendered to madness, a celebrant of the "gay, ghastly, holiday" where "terror's free", where

> The possibility to pass
> Without a moment's bell,
> Into Conjecture's presence—
> Is like a face of steel
>
> That suddenly looks into ours
> With a metallic grin—
> The cordiality of Death
> Who drills his welcome in.

Her legend does not conveniently accommodate the outsize "Empress of Calvary" whose suffering goads her to defy the very God her deeper nature wants only to praise for His every manifestation of "the daily miracle". Neither does it find room for the defeated woman who, with careful malevolence, undermines the divine optimism that promises her only salvation. In this role she is never the pretty versifier or the sprightly caroler of the New England idyll or even the long suffering communicant with nature. In this role she is the demonic artist in fury, wrenching the tight meters and neat figures of her characteristic language in order to come upon utterance adequate to her anguish.

An Ethereal Visitor

A second Emily Dickinson is the reclusive bride of silence— the radiant girl in white who tarries in the world like an ethereal visitor and associates on speaking terms with birds, bees, butterflies, lilacs and gentians as her only equals. She is the one for whom isolation from society is the way to grace—a discipline that involves the universe. She is the one for whom the unknowable is as present to her vision as the view from her window. Since her covenants with Time, Death and Immortality are real, she is able to look down upon the small events of life with the grand indulgence of those who feel themselves of the elect. Her theme in this role is imminence—the imminence of Death and Revelation—and in a hundred expressions she dramatizes the breath of God on her hand and the tug of eternity in her bones. As her denial of ordinary life approaches the absolute, her embrace of the universe becomes all but final. This is the strongest Emily Dickinson and the most pliable. Her mind plays like lightning between the immediate and the ultimate. To her, a fire in a neighbour's barn is not merely a local disaster to which she responds with natural sympathy ; it is also the fire that burns Rome and the flames that gut the great library at Alexandria ; finally it is the idea of fire as the destructive element itself. This is Emily Dickinson in possession of her affections and, at the same time, conversant with the human fate that primordially dooms them. When she writes her address, she puts down Main Street, Amherst, Massachusetts, but she means The Mind of God.

Engagement with Human Sympathies

Emily Dickinson the dutiful daughter, affectionate sister and compassionate neighbour is another of the figures that emerge from her poetry and is perhaps the most generally engaging one. Since she was not taken up with the world's affairs—even to the extent that they were carried on amid the academic quiet of her town—she was not subject to mundane responsibilities and was subsequently above praise or blame. A citizen among her townsmen, yet not subject to the rules by which they lived, she became a sort of hovering presence, the ornamental eccentric of a community independent enough to harbour her with as much pride as embarrassment. "For the last fifteen years of her life", according to George F. Whicher, "the village knew Emily Dickinson only as a white figure flitting about the garden in the summer dusk, as a voice from the dimness of the hall, startling visitors in the Dickinson parlour by spectral interjections, or as a presence responding to occasion for congratulation or condolence by neighbourly gifts of flowers and dainties accompanied by little notes pencilled in an odd hand and phrased in orphic idiom." In spite of her isolation, she was solicitous of village life, held it closely in her attention long after she had ceased to be part of it, and observed it constantly from behind the curtains of her window and the hedges of her garden. Her poems show in abundance her affection for men, women, and children. While this feeling was real, her own sense of necessity kept it distant from its objects except on the many occasions when death provoked her elegies. Death was always larger to her than life, and not until she saw a beloved neighbour in its perspective was his individual meaning apt to command her full attention. The shy spirit of her own household and of the next-door residence of her brother and his wife, she was even in these places the removed observer. Human sympathies engaged her deeply but, holding herself free to her own commitments, she found her own plateau of vantage. From this elevation she played a game of conceits with the cosmos. Matters of Calvinist sermons that her townsmen might mull over on their way home from church, news of war, and reports from abroad appearing in the *Springfield Daily Republican*, all became part of the philosophic reaches of her solitary communion. She tamed them to her hand, domesticated them, turned them out in neatly dressed stanzas and then in most cases put them away like dolls for which she had no further use.

The Coy Spinster

The final, and the least memorable of the several Emily Dickinsons is, unfortunately, perhaps the one most widely quoted. This Emily Dickinson is the writer of verses as quaintly flowered and full of jingles as a rack of greeting cards. She is the coy Emily who holds to an eternally protracted girlhood, whose childish postures have never been outgrown, who assumes the histrionic or culturally pious attitudes of her time and who flirts with all the creatures of the earth and air as if she were the inhabitant of a nineteenth-century Disneyland. This is the Emily Dickinson who makes God "a noted clergyman", who reduces the figures of history and literature to the plaster bathos of the Rogers Group, and whose maidenish tolerance of drunkenness and other kinds of misbehaviour in the big world makes a sophisticated reader writhe with discomfort.

Psychology may hold clues to great disparities among aspects of Emily Dickinson's personality, but only her poetry provides the evidence that forces us to read her "letter to the world." Whatever emotional disaster it was that drove her to elect and finally to covet a life of obscurity, poetry was the thing that made that life tolerable and transformed it into a creative career.

Kishen Dhar
M.A. (Pol. Sc. Eco. Eng. Lit.) B.Ed.
SRINAGER-190002
KASHMIR

3

Emily Dickinson and The New England Culture Or Emily Dickinson's Puritan Heritage

The Age of Crisis and Transition

The intellectual climate into which Emily Dickinson was born had the features of a transition. But the period was also a major crisis culminating in the war between the States. After that war, in New England as well as in the South, spiritual crises were definitely minor until the First World War. Yet, a generation before the war of 1861-65, the transformation of New England had begun. Theocracy was on the decline, and industrialism was rising. The important thing to remember about the puritan theocracy is that it permeated, as it could never have done in England, a whole society. It gave final, definite meaning to life, the life of pious and impious, of learned and vulgar alike. It gave—and this is its significance for Emily Dickinson, and in only slightly lesser degree for Melville and Hawthorne—it gave an heroic proportion and a tragic mode to the experience of the individual. The history of the New England theocracy, from Apostle Eliot to Cotton Mather, is rich in gigantic intellects that broke down—or so it must appear to an outsider—in a kind of moral decadence and depravity. Socially we may not like the New England idea. Yet it had an immense, incalculable value for literature: it dramatized the human soul.

The Puritan Theology

The Puritan's "vision" of himself and the cosmos was formulated into theological tenets the truth of which rested not on scriptural authority alone but on the individual's sense of things. To the Puritan, God was the self-existent Being who devised the magnificent harmony of Creation and sustained it in contingent existence while He reigned above in incomprehensible sovereignty. But God's plan had been ruined by man's original sin, through which he lost grace. The loss of grace, that projection of the divine whose indwelling presence united man and nature and God, left man in solitary need and ushered in death, pain, depravity—the consequences of man's descent to a merely natural existence.

The Scriptures were God's words to man, through which he could understand the truth of his plight and the nature of his regeneration. Man's duty was to ponder and elucidate God's message and to carry out His Commandments. Hence the single-minded concern of Puritan divines with applying man's reason to God's revelation ; and the unrelenting labour to erect a vast theological system on which fallen man could rely and within which he could think and act.

Religious Truths and Individual Experience

At its best Puritanism amounted to more than an arid rationalism or an abject surrender to formulae. Within the theological structure, the obligation of the individual man strained his stamina to the uttermost. He had to confront the universe starkly and answer within the privacy of his heart all the basic questions : Who am I ? What is my relation to the not-me ? How must I live in the certitude of death ? Have I grounds for hope or not ? In this confrontation the noblest Puritans neither winced nor succumbed. On the contrary, within their theology they lived as individuals fully and passionately ; universal religious truth and individual human experience were working not at cross-purposes but toward concentricity. Jonathan Edwards asserted the importance of the passions and the holiness of religious affections.

From Edwards to Emerson

Only seventy-five years after Edwards' death it seemed to Emerson that the body of doctrine had become a corpse, devoid of feeling or response, stiffened by rigor mortis. What could a living person do but inter the dead ? But then he was left to confront the cosmos without even the authority of the Scriptures or the protective framework of established truth. Moreover, Emerson started from a different philosophical viewpoint from Edwards : Emerson's epistemology was not based on Locke's inductive method but on the intuitive perception of the post-Kantian transcendentalists ; his metaphysic found German idealism and Oriental mysticism more congenial than Christian dualism.

Emerson's Vision of Man

Nevertheless, Edwards' and Emerson's formulations bespeak continuity as well as change. Like a good New Englander, Emerson also began with a double awareness of things : there was, or seemed to be, Nature and Soul, matter and spirit, not-me and me, Understanding and Reason. There was an 'inevitable dualism", and the purpose of life was to resolve the opposition—not in some hypothetical future but here and now. He could admit the appalling impingements and limitations which constituted "Fate" ; he could concede that "there is a crack in every thing that God has made" ; he could see the world as fragmented and out of joint. But for Emerson the remedy was right at hand. The Fall was an illusion ; nor was man helpless and debased, except by choice. Man was the vessel of divinity and need only release his energies ; he was "a god in ruins", and could be a god in fact, like Jesus Christ. Man's fall was only his first realization of himself as an existence apparently distinct, but the process of living was the opening out of one's self to discover "an occult relation" with all other things. In moments of most expansive perception the divine energy flowing from "me" became one again with the divine energy surging from the "not-me". At such times "I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God." Each and all, matter and spirit are One.

Splitting of the Puritan Mind

What had happened over the years was that the masterful synthesis which Edwards represented—that glowing fusion of intellectual and emotional character, that precarious poising of delight in this world against commitment to the next, that careful balance between individual and church—had been split asunder, and the Puritan mind, unable to repair the damage, would not be whole again. Thus, however similar are the axiomatic assumptions of Edwards' "vision" and the "vision" of Emerson, they could hardly have projected more dissimilar views of man's situation. Both men would agree that the individual loses himself in the highest knowledge only through a supra-logical spiritual power which manifests itself in a movement of the affections. Edwards would call that power grace; and Emerson, Reason. Edwards would place its source in God, and Emerson would place it in man. For Edwards heaven was the transcendence of earth; for Emerson it was the fulfilment of earth.

Moments of Revelation and Insight

In the whole span of the New England tradition, from Bradford and Winthrop and Edwards to Emerson and Dickinson and later to Eliot and Frost, individual experience finally focused and rested upon the pivotal moments of revelation and insight—the moments of divine manifestation and human vision. This union—however insecure—in which the individual lost himself in totality is the sole end of that Augustinian strain of piety which Perry Miller saw as the bright heart of Puritanism. "Without it individual life was a burden; with it living became richness and joy." But while Christians see regeneration as the moment of grace, "other people have found other names for the experience: to lovers it is love, to mystics it is ecstasy, to poets inspiration." Edwards called men to the "Great Awakening"; Emerson smiled in the calm assurance of Reason's ever-expanding sway; and in *Four Quartets* Eliot—that Puritan misplaced in the Midwest, who moved through Boston back to orthodoxy in the Church that his forbears had abandoned—composed a masterful meditation on "the still point of the turning world." But Emily Dickinson, somewhat after Emerson and before Eliot, could not arrive at the peace and assurance that they found at the ends of divergent paths. In the face of conflicting evidences her problem, like Frost's, was "what to make of a diminished thing," and her response, like his, was "to get now and then elated."

The Crucial Period of Thaw

For the Puritans, "a religious heart inevitably translated itself into the formulae of theology ; to them the conception of private experience was real, but not of private expression—wherein they differed from modern poets." Although Edwards might have disagreed, Allen Tate has argued that the best poetry is written when the control of the intellectual and religious order of an age is breaking down. Then, says Mr. Tate, the poet—who knows the elements of this order as part of his heritage without being able any longer to accept them unquestioningly—is forced to examine that heritage in terms of his own experience. The shattering of the tradition frees yet directs the energies of the imagination, and the result is magnificent poetry. If Allen Tate is correct, Emily Dickinson came at the auspicious moment and to precisely the right place. Nurtured in the conservative Connecticut Valley, she not only came to distrust its theology but was personally incapable of logical, not to say theological thought. System and argument, like the austere New England winter, were too hard and frigid for her, but now, at the crucial period of thaw, she came upon the warm, swelling, swirling notions of the Romantic poet-prophets.

Espousal of Transcendentalism

As early as 1850, Emily Dickinson had clearly absorbed the essential features of Transcendentalism : the optimism, the emphasis on experimentation and originality, the sense of social purpose, the metaphysical and mystical speculations, the pulse of rhythm and imagery. Some of the transcendental doctrines which she espoused could easily be catalogued. If Emerson referred to the world as "a divine dream, from which we may presently awake," Dickinson said : "Reality is a dream from which but a portion of mankind have yet waked..." If Emerson urged self-knowledge and self-reliance, Dickinson exhorted her poetic persona :

> Soto ! Explore thyself !
> Therein thyself shalt find
> The "Undiscovered Continent"—
> No Settler had the Mind.

If Emerson perceived the correspondence which made the world the emblematic "web of God", Dickinson saw things as "trembling Emblems" and felt the movements of an unseen Weaver. If Emerson's position rested on the divine faculty of Intuition, Dickinson claimed "Glee intuitive" as "the gift of God." It must be remembered that Emily Dickinson's mental processes began with an intolerable sense of emptiness which drove her to project as concrete evidence of her incompleteness the loss of childhood, father, mother, lover. She could list childhood and the dead among the "Things that never can come back" ; she could even enumerate the things lost with childhood. But in all honesty she had to add : "But is that all I have lost—memory drapes her Lips." These losses—genuine and heartfelt—were at least definable and hence bearable, but what seemed excruciating was the fact that almost the first act of the mind was an awareness of isolation. Edwards would have attributed this knowledge to original sin, and Emerson to the separation of the object from the Oversoul. But Emily Dickinson's was a characteristically personal response : all she knew was that she had to manage somehow from day to day, eating and sleeping and speaking and acting in the hollowness of the void :

> A loss of something ever felt I—
> The first that I could recollect
> Bereft I was—of what I knew not

Emily's Place in the New England History

In the history of the New England spirit Emily Dickinson occupies a pivotal place. Puritan orthodoxy had reached its culmination as a religious and social order in the mid-seventeenth century and a century later had found its most magnificent exponent in Jonathan Edwards, after the order itself had begun to pull apart. By the 1850's Emerson had reinvigorated the New England spirit, but only by isolating certain aspects of Edwards' thought and combining and infusing them with the vitality of Transcendentalism. Nevertheless, by so doing Emerson brought about a further disintegration of the great Puritan synthesis, a separation of the heart from the head. For all his Calvinism—or rather precisely because of his acceptance of Calvinism with his mind and heart—Edwards was a more complete person than any of these men.

Emily Dickinson points to the end of the tradition not because she represents, as Emerson does, a splintering off of a part of that tradition, but because she embodies in her life and poetry the painful divisions that sundered the New England mind. Emerson was essentially a serene soul, as she was essentially a tormented one. He could be happy because out of selected fragments he had made a shining new faith—shorn now of sin and dogma and devils. To reliance on the intuitive vision of the man-god in a sinless Eden he gave thumping assent with all the eloquent enthusiasm of the poet-preacher. But as Emily Dickinson realized—along with Hawthorne and Melville—he had had to close his mind and heart to much of the complex reality in order to achieve this serenity.

Major Elements of the Puritan Vision

There is no indication that Emily Dickinson was acquainted with the writings of Jonathan Edwards ; but from the remarks she made he was associated in her mind with the faith of the fathers. Since what remained of New England Protestantism seemed to her intellectually preposterous and emotionally spurious, she heeded Emerson's call to the poet's rather than the Christian's vocation. With Wordsworth and Emerson and Whitman, she sought to find herself by losing herself, to lose herself by opening "an original relation to the universe." For dazzling moments she and the world were transfigured into divinity, but the difficulty lay in holding the transfiguration in a sustaining vision. In a late poem she weighed "Orpheus' Sermon" against the preacher's, or Emerson's sermon against Edwards', and aligned herself again with Emerson and the "warbling teller." Nevertheless, her unshakable conception of reality and awareness of the human condition were derived not so much from Emerson as from the "old-fashioned" Puritans :

Paradise is that old mansion
Many owned before—
Occupied by each an instant
Then reversed the Door—
Bliss is frugal of her Leases
Adam taught her Thrift
Bankrupt once through his excesses—

These seven lines of an unfinished poem rehearse all the major elements of the Puritan "vision" : the initial harmony of the universe ; man's violation of that harmony and his consequent alienation ; the possibility of reunion and its fulfilment in visionary instants ; the bankruptcy of life without vision.

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Emily Dickinson's Lyricism

A Sharp Stabbing Quality

Emily Dickinson's poetry has a sharp stabbing quality which disturbs and overthrows the spiritual ease of the reader. The critics are undoubtedly justified in complaining that her work is often cryptic in thought and unmelodious in expression. Almost all her poems are written in short measures, in which the effect of curt brevity is increased by her verbal penuriousness. Compression and epigrammatical ambush are her aids; she proceeds, without preparation or apology, by sudden, sharp zigzags. What intelligence a reader has must be exercised in the poetic game of hare-and-hounds, where ellipses, inversions, and unexpected climaxes mislead those who pursue sweet reasonableness. Nothing, for instance, could seem less poetical than this masterpiece of unspeakable sounds and chaotic rhymes :—

COCOON

Drab habitation of whom ?
Tabernacle or tomb,
Or dome of worm,
Or porch of gnome,
Or some elf's catacomb.

If all her poems were of this sort there would be nothing more to say; but such poems are exceptions. Because we happen to possess full records of her varying poetic moods, published, not with the purpose of selecting her most artistic work, but with the intention of revealing very significant human documents, we are not justified in singling out a few bizarre poems and subjecting these to skeptical scrutiny. The poems taken in their entirety are a surprising and impressive revelation of poetic attitude and of poetic method in registering spiritual experiences. To the general reader many of the poems seem uninspired, imperfect, crude, while to the student of the psychology of literary art they offer most stimulating material for examination, because they enable one to penetrate into poetic origins, into radical, creative energy.

Expression of Vital Meanings

To gratify the aesthetic sense was never Emily Dickinson's desire; she despised the poppy and mandragora of felicitous phrases which lull the spirit to apathy and emphasize art for art's sake. Poetry to her was the expression of vital meanings, the transfer of passionate feeling and of deep conviction. Her work is essentially lyric; it lacks the slow, retreating harmonies of epic measures, it does not seek to present leisurely details of any sort; its purpose is to objectify the swiftly-passing moments and to give them poignant expression.

Fusion of Idea and Expression

Lyric melody finds many forms in her work. Her repressed and austere verses, inexpansive as they are, have persistent appeal. Slow, serene movement gives enduring beauty to these elegiac stanzas :

> Let down the bars, O Death !
> The tired flocks come in
> Whose bleating ceases to repeat,
> Whose wandering is done.
>
> Thine is the stillest night,
> Thine the securest fold ;
> Too near thou art for seeking thee,
> Too tender to be told.

The opposite trait of buoyant alertness is illustrated in the cadences of the often-quoted lines on the humming-bird :

> A route of evanescence
> With a revolving wheel;
> A resonance of emerald,
> A rush of cochineal.

Between these two margins come many wistful, pleading, or triumphant notes. The essential qualities of her music are simplicity and quivering responsiveness to emotional moods. Idea and expression are so indissolubly fused in her work that no analysis of her style and manner can be attempted without realizing that every one of her phrases, her changing rhythms, is a direct reflection of her personality. The objective medium is entirely conformable to the inner life, a life of peculiarly dynamic force which agitates, arouses, spurs the reader.

Intensity of Spiritual Experience

The secret of Emily Dickinson's wayward power seems to lie in three special characteristics, the first of which is her intensity of spiritual experience. Hers is the record of a soul endowed with unceasing activity in a world not material, but one where concrete facts are the cherished revelation of divine significances. Inquisitive always, alert to the inner truths of life, impatient of the brief destinies of convention, she isolated herself from the petty demands of social amenity. A sort of tireless, probing energy of mental action absorbed her, yet there is little speculation of a purely philosophical sort in her poetry. Her stubborn beliefs, learned in childhood, persisted to the end,—her conviction that life is beauty, that love explains grief, and that immortality endures. The quality of her writing is profoundly stirring, because it betrays, not the intellectual pioneer, but the acutely observant woman, whose capacity for feeling was profound. The still, small voice of tragic revelation one hears in these compressed lines :

My life closed twice before its close;
　　It yet remains to see
If immortality unveil
　　A third event to me.

So huge, so hopeless to conceive,
　　As these that twice befell.
Parting is all we know of heaven,
　　And all we need of hell.

For sheer, grim, unrelieved expression of emotional truth there are few passages which can surpass the personal experience revealed in the following poem :

Pain has an element of blank ;
It cannot recollect
When it began, or if there were
A day when it was not.

It has no future but itself,
Its infinite realms contain
Its past, enlightened to perceive
New periods of pain.

The Fugitive Glory of Nature

Her absorption in the world of feeling found some relief in associations with nature; yet although she loved nature and wrote many nature lyrics, her interpretations are always more or less swayed by her own state of being. The colours, the fragrances, the forms of the material world, meant to her a divine symbolism; but the spectacle of nature had in her eyes a more fugitive glory. lesser consolation, than it had for Wordsworth and other true lovers of the earth.

Never has any poet described the haunting magic of autumnal days with such fine perception of beauty as marks the opening stanzas of 'My Cricket' :

Farther in summer than the birds,
Pathetic from the grass,
A minor nation celebrates
Its unobtrusive mass.

No ordinance is seen,
So gradual the grace,
A pensive custom it becomes,
Enlarging loneliness.

Most effective, however, are those poems where she describes not mere external beauty, but, rather, the effect of nature upon a sensitive observer :

There's a certain slant of light,
On winter afternoons,
That oppresses, like the weight
Of cathedral tunes.

Heavenly hurt it gives us;
We can find no scar,
But eternal difference
Where the meanings are.

Keen Sensitiveness to Irony and Paradox

It is essentially in the world of spiritual forces that her depth of poetic originality is shown. Others may describe nature, but few can describe life as she does. Human nature, the experiences of the world of souls, was her special study, to which she brought, in addition to that quality of intensity, a second characteristic,—keen sensitiveness to irony and paradox. Nearly all her perceptions are tinged with penetrating sense of the contrasts in human vicissitude. Controlled, alert, expectant, aware of the perpetual compromise between clay and spirit, she accepted the inscrutable truths of life in a fashion which reveals how humour and pathos contend in her. It is this which gives her style those sudden turns and that startling imagery. Humour is not, perhaps, a characteristic associated with pure lyric poetry, and yet Emily Dickinson's transcendental humour is one of the deep sources of her supremacy. Both in thought and in expression she gains her piercing quality, her undeniable spiritual thrust, by this gift, stimulating, mystifying, but forever inspiring her readers to a profound conception of high destinies.

Love of Challenging Symbolism

Emily Dickinson took delight in piquing the curiosity, and often her love of mysterious challenging symbolism led her to the borderland of obscurity. No other of her poems has, perhaps, such a union of playfulness and of terrible comment upon the thwarted aspirations of a suffering soul as has this :

I asked no other thing,
No other was denied
I offered Being for it;
The mighty merchant smiled.

Brazil ? He twirled a button,
Without a glance my way;
'But, madam, is there nothing else
That we can show to-day ?'

Since life seemed, to her, seldom to move along wholly simple and direct ways, she delighted to accentuate the fact that out of apparent contradictions and discords are wrought the subtlest harmonies :

To learn the transport by the pain,
As blind men learn the sun.

Courageous Acceptance of Life

In addition to passionate intensity and fine irony, there is a third characteristic trait in her poetry, a dauntless courage in accepting life. Existence, to her, was a momentous experience, and she let no promises of a future life deter her from feeling the throbs of this one. No false comfort released her from dismay at present anguish. An energy of pain and joy swept her soul, but did not leave any residue of bitterness or of sharp innuendo against the ways of the Almighty. Grief was a faith, not a disaster. She made no effort to smother the recollections of old companionship by that species of spiritual death to which so many people consent. Her creed was expressed in these stanzas :

They say that 'time assuages,'—
Time never did assuage;
An actual suffering strengthens,
As sinews do, with age.

Time is a test of trouble,
But not a remedy.
If such it prove, it proves too
There was no malady.

The True Lyric Appeal : Intimacy of Abstractions

The willingness to look with clear directness at the spectacle of life is observable everywhere in her work. Passionate fortitude was hers, and this is the greatest contribution her poetry makes to the reading world. It is not expressed precisely in single poems, but rather is present in all, as key and interpretation of her meditative scrutiny. Without elaborate philosophy, yet with irresistible ways of expression, Emily Dickinson's poems have true lyric appeal, because they make abstractions, such as love, hope, loneliness, death, and immortality, seem near and intimate and faithful. She looked at existence with a vision so exalted and secure that the reader is long dominated by that very excess of spiritual conviction. A poet in the deeper mystic qualities of feeling rather than in the external merit of precise rhymes and flawless art, Emily Dickinson's place is among those whose gifts are 'Too intricate for renown.'

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Emily Dickinson's Mysticism

Search for Definition

Emily Dickinson's poetry is suffused with the spirit of mysticism at several places. But the term 'mysticism' is a difficult one to deal with. The words 'mystic' and 'mysticism' have become rather suspect in modern, materialist society. So it is important to define and place this term, at the outset. Mystics have appeared, it would seem, with fair frequency at many periods, in many cultures ; but there is no doubt that when, in the West, we speak of true mysticism, we have in mind the example of the Christian saints. "In Christianity," says Evelyn Underhill, "the 'natural mysticism'... which is latent in humanity and at a certain point of development breaks out in every race, came to itself ; and attributed for the first time true and distinct personality to its Object"—namely, God. True mystics do not indulge in diffuse pantheism or hold to the aim of "the occult", which wishes to wrench supernal power to human uses. In the words of another commentator : "The aim and content of Christian mysticism is not self or nature, but God."

The Poet and the Mystic

We can see at once that there is a difference between the character, as well as the aims, of true mystics and of poets ; and we know that to come upon the two gifts in one person is extremely rare. But close points of resemblance do exist between the mystic experience, at its purest and best, and the experience of poetic—or, indeed, any creative—expression. Poets down the centuries, visited by that power which the ancients call *the Muse*, have described their experience in much the same way as the mystic describes his ecstatic union with Divine Truth. This experience has been rendered at length, and dramatically, by Dante, as well as by St. John of the Cross ; and certain poems in the literature of every language attest to moments when, for the poet, "the deep and primal life which he shares with all creation has been roused from its sleep." And both poets and mystics have described with great poignance that sense of the deprivation and that shutting away from grace which follows the loss of [illegible] or of the inspiring breath), which is called, in the language of mysticism, "the dark night of the soul." Moreover, the progress of the mystic towards illumination, and of the poet towards the full depth and richness of his insight—are much alike. Both work from the world of reality, toward the realm of Essence ; from the microcosm to the macrocosm. Both have an intense and accurate sense of their surroundings ; there is nothing vague or floating in their perception of reality ; it is indeed as though they saw "through, not with, the eye." And they are filled with love for the beauty they perceive in the world of time—"this remarkable world" as Emily Dickinson called it ; and concerning death they are neither fearful nor morbid—how could they be, since they feel immortality behind it ? They document life's fearful limitations from which they suffer, but they do not mix self-pity with the account of their suffering (which they describe, like their joy, in close detail). They see the world in a grain of sand and Heaven in a wild flower ; and now and again they bring eternity into focus, as it were, in a phrase of the utmost clarity. In the work of Emily Dickinson such moments of still and halted perception are many. The slant of light on a winter day, the still brilliance of a summer noon, the sound of the wind before the rain—she speaks of these, and we share the shock of insight, the slight dislocation of serial events, the sudden shift from the Manifold into the One.

Emily's Religious Unorthodoxy

One of the dominant facts concerning Emily Dickinson is her spirit of religious unorthodoxy. Her deeply religious feeling ran outside the bounds of dogma ; this individualism was, in fact, an inheritance from her Calvinist forbears, but it was out of place when contrasted to the Evangelicanism to which, in her time, so many Protestants had succumbed. She early set herself against the guilt and gloom inherent in this revivalism. She avoided the constrictions which a narrow insistence on religious rule and law would put upon her. She had read Emerson with delight, but, as Yvor Winters has remarked, it is a mistake to think of her as a Transcendentalist in dimity. Here again she worked through to a standpoint and an interpretation of her own ; her attitude towards pain and suffering, towards the shocking facts of existence, was far more realistic than Emerson's. As we examine her chief spiritual preoccupations, we see how closely she relates to the English Romantic poets who, a generation or so before her, fought a difficult and unpopular battle against the eighteenth century's cold logic and mechanical point of view.

The Terror and Anguish of Destiny

Emily Dickinson wanted to make sure that her poems were 'alive' and that they 'breathed'. Balance, delicacy and force—fed by her exquisite senses and her infinitely lively and inquisitive mind—these are the qualities which reinforce her vision into the heart and spirit of nature, and into her own heart. Her favourite subject was not death, as was long supposed ; for life, love and the soul are also recurring subjects. But the greatest interest lies in her progress as a writer, and as a person. We see the young poet moving away by gradual degrees, from her early slight addiction to graveyardism, to an Emersonian belief in the largeness and harmony of nature. Step by step, she advances into the terror and anguish of her destiny ; she is frightened, but she holds fast and describes her fright. She is driven to the verge of sanity, but manages to remain, in some fashion, the observer and recorder of her extremity. Nature is no longer a friend, but often an inimical presence. Nature is a haunted house. And—a truth even more terrible—the inmost self can be haunted.

Mystery and Sacredness of the Word

At the highest summit of her art, she resembles no one. She begins to cast forward toward the future : to produce poems in which we recognize, as one French critic has said, both the *voyant* faculty of Rimbaud and Mallarme's feeling for the mystery and sacredness of the word. This high period begins in the early 1860's, and is not entirely consistent ; the power seems to come and go, but it is indubitably there. And when it is present, she can describe with clinical precision the actual emotional event, the supreme moment of anguish, and even her death itself. And she finds symbols which fit the event—terrible symbols. The experience of suffering is like dying of the cold ; or it resembles the approach of a maelstrom, which finally engulfs the victim ; one escapes from suffering as from the paws of a fiend, from whose grasp one emerges more dead than alive.

Aphorisms of the Unknowable

Emily Dickinson's power to say the unsayable—to hint of the unknowable—is the power of the seer, in her equipped with an ironic intelligence and great courage of spirit. The stuff of her imagination is of this world ; there is nothing macabre about her material and there is very little of the laboured or artificial about her means. If "she mastered life by rejecting it", she mastered that Nature concerning which she had such ambivalent feeling by adding herself to the sum of all things, in a Rilkean habit of praise. "She kept in touch with reality", someone has said of her, "by the clearest and finest of the senses—the sense of sight. Perhaps the great vitality of contact by vision is the essence, in part, of her originality." How exactly she renders the creatures of this earth ! She gives them to us, not as symbols of this or that, but as themselves. And her lyrical notation is so precise, so fine and moves so closely in union with her mind, that she is continually striking out aphorisms, as is usual in mystical writing from Plotinus to Blake. And as her life goes on, everything becomes whittled down, evanescent. Her handwriting becomes a kind of fluid print ; her poems become notations ; all seems to be on the point of disappearing. And suddenly all disappears. "She was a visionary", says Richard Chase, "to whom truth came with exclusive finality and like her Puritan forbears she was severe, downright, uncompromising, visionary, factual, sardonic."

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Emily Dickinson and Existentialism

Poet of Suffering and Terror

Emily Dickinson was essentially a tragic poet, endowed with great tragic insight and a great tragic sensibility. Her finest poems have to do with man's lot in a world that is tragically "other" than himself; developing this theme, they anticipate the tragic sense of life as it has been reformulated for our time by Unamuno and the existentialists. Hers was an outlook suffused with *Angst*, dread and terror. It was uniquely responsive to the brutalities which life imposes on the individual, and actually aware of the nothingness with which individual existence appears surrounded. Born, in some fashion or the other, of personal frustration, the outlook passed the supreme test which art demands of suffering. It transcended the personal to become concerned with suffering and frustration as universal themes.

Similarities with the Crisis Philosophy

Emily Dickinson was in no sense a systematic philosopher. Her unresolved metaphysical ponderings were the results of the determination that she had to know, rather than of logical thinking or of an active interest in philosophy. One might even add that the ponderings reflect a mind too vain and petulant to be at ease with the ordinary, inescapable limitations on human knowledge. Emily Dickinson chose to see through God's eyes; her philosophical poems are protests against all the aspects of experience—whether natural, human, or divine—which seemed to interfere with that impossible project. Yet, for all its naivete, her philosophical point of view will bear comparison with the crisis philosophy that has been of influence in our own time. There is more than one trace of Christian existentialism in the relationship which Emily Dickinson establishes between existence and essence, in her stress upon God's unreliability, and in her conception of man as the pawn and prisoner of obscure cosmic forces.

Quest for God, Order, and Meaning

It would appear that too much is made of the absolute chaos and absurdity which are supposed to characterize the existentialist's vision. The existentialist sees a thoroughly disjointed world, yes; he seems overwhelmed by a veritable clutter of activities, all of which decline being patterned, and from which every shred of significance appears to have been removed. As it confuses, however, experience still has a way of proffering vague hopes. Hemmed in by chaos, the existentialist is haunted by the feeling that order might be realised, provided he took a fresh approach to the problem, or looked at life in a new way, or chose a different perspective from which to survey the world before him. Kierkegaard himself will illustrate this frustration. The attempt to find order—specifically, the struggle to offer rational proofs for God or to deduce God's existence from the facts of experience—is, in Kierkegaard's notorious phrase, an "excellent subject for the comedy of the higher lunacy." But to recognize the folly of the attempt is by no means to be free of making it. None save the foolish deny God outright; and to give up looking for Him is simply to be reminded of His presence all over again. The real heart of the existentialist dilemma is that one perceives meaninglessness everywhere, even as one is prodded to search anew for meaning. Existentialist terror derives from the fact that one must concede the impossibility of the search, even as a struggle to achieve the impossible continues unabated.

Invitation and Rebuff of Experience

Emily Dickinson's relations with experience were expressed through identically these same paradoxes. Her quest for certainty could have been cosummated in either of two ways: through an exact knowledge of whatever purpose life possesses, or through the final realization that since all is rush and disorder, there is no purpose and never can be any. But both these fixed views were luxuries that life never permitted her to enjoy. If the flowing of detail might suggest to Emily Dickinson that incoherency had triumphed, still by the manner of the flowing—by the fact of its constancy—she was forever drawn back to the idea that a Plan existed and could ultimately be spelled out. One of her most powerful symbols is the springtime light, which comes, hovers, beckons, and withdraws—but in the act of withdrawal gives promise of a later return. This is the symbol of an essentially existentialist universe, in which experience simultaneously invites and rebuffs, and in which the individual can no more deafen himself to the invitation than he can follow it through to a satisfactory conclusion.

Victim of Cosmic Gossip

In sensing that she is under perpetual surveillance, furthermore, Emily Dickinson anticipates in her work an important theme of existentialist fiction. In particular, she is likely to remind us of the indignities suffered by Kafka's Joseph K. It is his fate to feel himself the victim of what might be termed cosmic gossip. He is talked about by "somebody", arraigned for trial before unaccountable jurors, set upon by the mysterious occupants of a mysterious castle. His extreme anxiety results not so much from the situations themselves, as from his awareness that while he can never begin to comprehend his adversaries, still, where Joseph K. is concerned, they possess the most complete knowledge, have somehow been supplied with dossiers containing the most intimate kind of information.

Exposure to Invasion

It is an anxiety from which Emily Dickinson is rarely free. We see how she suspects that Nature whispers about her, and how, in the presence of Nature's "Haunted House", she represents her identity in the form of a cracked cave, dreadfully exposed and open to invasion. In lines that are still more Kafkaesque, she can say of herself :

> Nature and God—I neither knew
> Yet both so well knew me
> They startled, like Executors
> Of my identity.

As for Joseph K., the problem of Emily Dickinson's speaker is that of knowing nothing, but of labouring under the realization that she is terribly known. A two-way conversation with God and Nature is out of the question, for both are too vague for definition and far too remote to be reached. But there is no denying them, either. Both are indisputably "out there" someplace, operating as existential menaces, who have the insight to see at a glance and the power to destroy in an instant.

Distance from Existentialism

Yet the term "existentialism" is, of course, an importation where Emily Dickinson is concerned. The label fits her predicaments well enough. But unlike Emersonianism, of which she was actively conscious, and unlike symbolism, which she explicitly practiced, the formal concepts of existentialism remain so foreign to the concepts in which she might have thought that they have the air of being rather dragged in and made to fit.

7

Emily Dickinson's Concept of Beauty

Nature of Beauty

Emily Dickinson's aesthetic credo is most substantially revealed in her concept of beauty, and the philosophy of all her Puritan past is transmuted into art in her poems on the nature of beauty. Like salvation, it comes as a grace, an infusion from without, an emanation which the creature passively receives and is powerless to win by effort to attain it. It is not merely similar to God's love, but is in fact God's love for man. It is the love which possesses those who are willing to pass through the straight path of suffering to discover the redemption which offers immortality.

I died for Beauty—but was scarce
Adjusted in the Tomb
When One who died for Truth, was lain
In an adjoining Room—

He questioned softly "Why I failed" ?
"For Beauty", I replied—
"And I—for Truth—Themself are One—
We Brethren are," He said—

And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night—
We talked between the Rooms—
Until the Moss had reached our lips—
And covered up—our names—

Beauty—Beyond Definition

Beauty inheres, it cannot be fashioned or formed. "Beauty—be not caused—It is." An ecstatic experience, like heaven, cannot be defined.

The Definition of Beauty is
That Definition is none—
Of Heaven, easing Analysis,
Since Heaven and He are One.

Yet the beholder or listener must be willing to possess :

To hear an Oriole sing
May be a common thing—
Or only a divine.

It is not of the Bird
Who sings the same, unheard,
As unto Crowd—

The Fashion of the Ear
Attireth that it hear
In Dun, or fair—

So whether it be Rune,
Or whether it be none
Is of within.

The "Tune is in the Tree—"
The Skeptic—showeth me—
"No Sir ! In Thee !"

she is not thinking of death, but of the encroachment of the supernal, when she exclaims :

Beauty crowds me till I die
Beauty, mercy have on me
But if I expire today
Let it be in sight of thee—

The experience of beauty is a moral quality, won through redemptive suffering :

Must be a Wo—
A loss or so—
To bend the eye
Best Beauty's way—

But—once aslant
It notes Delight
As difficult
As Stalactite—

A common Bliss
Were had for less—
The price—is
Even as the Grace--

Our lord—thought no
Extravagance
To pay—a Cross—

Language of God

The bliss won easily is not beauty. Though the word as she uses it connotes the sensations received by observing the natural order in the world about us, she is talking about its redemptive quality. The discernment of beauty is an intellectual experience, in the sense that it can be perceived only by those who in fact take on the image of God. "Is it Intellect that the Patriot means when he speaks of his 'Native Land'?" she wrote to Higginson. In the beginning was the word, she is always aware, and the magic of language constantly elates her.

Strong Draughts of Their Refreshing Minds
To drink—enables Mine
Through Desert or the Wilderness
As bore it Sealed Wine—

To go elastic—Or as One
The Camel's trait—attained—
How powerful the Stimulus
Of an Hermetic Mind—

The poet, by consenting to the preordained suffering whereby creation is achieved, gains status, and the language he utters, being of God, bestows immortality. Such a concept is by no means original with Emily Dickinson, who knew her Shakespeare intimately.

Essential Oils are wrung—
The Attar from the Rose
Be not expressed by Suns—alone—
It is the gift of Screws—

The General Rose—decay—
But this—in Lady's Drawer
Make Summer—When the Lady lie
In Ceaseless Rosemary—

Beauty and Immortality

Most of the poems that equate beauty with immortality were written in 1862 and 1863. That which is beautiful is experienced both by the heart and the mind. We cannot comprehend its immensity nor be estranged from it. Our destiny is involved in it. What Emily Dickinson knew about Jonathan Edwards came to her by way of the Valley tradition, which stressed his sterner doctrines. She would probably have been surprised to know that the quatrain she wrote in the late seventies is a twenty-word summary of Edwards' thoughts on the subject, expressed one hundred and twenty years before in his greatest essay, *The Nature of True Virtue*.

Estranged from Beauty—none can be—
For Beauty is Infinity—
And power to be finite ceased
Before Identity was leased—

8

Search for Identity in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

Mystery of Suffering and the Power of Pain

To Emily Dickinson the problem of one's own identity and integrity was of paramount importance, and she began by considering the mystery of suffering. "I can wade grief", she begins one of the first on that theme, and concludes with the assertion that pain alone gives power; that men, stranded in mortality, learn through discipline that pain is supportable. Anodynes that deaden it dull our sense of values. It is the power to see truth, even the most painful, that supports man. At the level of human association, such experience teaches compassion. She develops the idea in some detail in "I measure every Grief I meet", wherein she wonders how different sufferings compare, and concludes :

To note the fashions—of the Cross—
And how they're mostly worn—
Still fascinated to presume
That Some—are like My Own—

At a more objective level she finds that

The hallowing of Pain
Like hallowing of Heaven,
Obtains at a corporeal cost—
The Summit is not given.

And that is because only full measures can pay the cost of reaching so high : "All—is the price of all." Again in 1864 the idea takes its final shape in one of her best utterances.

Experience is the Angled Road
Preferred against the Mind
By—Paradox—the Mind itself—
Presuming it to lead

Quite Opposite—How Complicate
The Discipline of Man—
Compelling Him to Choose Himself
His Preappointed Pain—

Freedom from Fear of Self

How does man win freedom from fear of himself or of the unknowable in all acts and relationships ? Whereas such an artist as Melville, upon precisely the same quest, had in his youth moved restlessly round the globe, Emily Dickinson stood still and dissected the atom. For her as for Melville the quest was baffling, at times tormenting, and continued throughout a lifetime. For both the easy assertion was no answer. "Is immortality true" ? was a question she could still phrase to Gladden near the end of her life, but he could not know when he replied to it that nearly twenty years before she had scaled the bleakness to a height not matched by his asseveration.

The Undiscovered Continent

The "self" she variously designates in such terms as the "undiscovered continent", and the "indestructible estate." The solitudes of space, of the sea, even of death, she styles populous assemblies compared to "That polar privacy—a soul admitted to itself."

On a Columnar Self—
How ample to rely
In Tumult—or Extremity—
How good the Certainty

That Lever cannot pry—
And Wedge cannot divide
Conviction—That Granitic Base—
Though None be on our Side—

Here the "self" is one's integrity : the convictions we live by even though they isolate us from those we love. And she concludes :

Suffice Us—for a Crowd—
Ourself—and Rectitude—
And that Assembly—not far off
From furthest Spirit—God.

In this moment of deepest assurance about the rightness of her way of thinking and living, she and God are close associates.

Living by Her Convictions

The straight path to her seclusion she deliberately chose, the better to enable her to participate in the common experiences of all mankind. She had elected to do so in 1862, when her creativeness was at flood and she sensed that her fulfilment as artist required time to spend with the hosts that visited her. "The Soul selects her own Society", she said, "Then—shuts the door." She has in mind a way of life, and she will remain unmoved even though chariots pause at her low gate or an emperor kneels upon her mat, presumably to beg her to alter her convictions or to offer inducements for accepting other close associations.

I've known her—from an ample nation—
Choose One—
Then—close the Valves of her attention—
Like stone—

The poem is universalized, but at the personal level it states her intent to live by her convictions.

The Soul : Friend or Spy

The poem beginning "The Soul unto itself" deals with the Hamlet theme, about which she never ceased to brood with acute sensitivity. The soul is either an "imperial friend" or the most "agonizing Spy". If it is secure against its own treachery, why should it fear that which is abroad ?

Itself—it's Sovreign—of itself
The Soul should stand in Awe.

In "One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted" the awe is spectral : "The Brain has Corridors—surpassing/Material Place," she says, concluding that "Ourself behind ourself, concealed—/ Should startle most." This was the thought in her mind when she remarked to Colonel Higginson in 1873 that there is one thing to be grateful for : that one is oneself and not somebody else.

Relationship between the Soul and Heaven

Especially charming are the poems which deal with the relationship between the soul and heaven, that is, between man's questing spirit and the manifestations in the world about us which uplift the spirit and surcharge it. The cordiality is that of host and guest. "The Soul should always stand ajar", so that if heaven (the guest) comes to call, the soul (the host) may be ready to welcome the ecstatic experience. The same relationship is envisioned in the poem that declares : "The Soul that hath a Guest/Doth seldom go abroad", because "Diviner Crowd at Home—/ Obliterate the need."

And Courtesy forbid
A Host's departure when
Upon Himself be visiting
The Emperor of Men—

Identity as Perception and Idea

In yet another written during these years of serene detachment she expresses the thought in terms of limitless wealth. "To own the Art within the Soul" is like owning "an Estate perpetual/Or a reduceless Mine." Nowhere is her artistic achievement more brilliantly fused with her deepened sense of destiny than in the four stanzas on the soul's identity. It is not an analysis of the relation of God and man, or of the relation of the soul to the body. She is not talking about man as a being, who thus shares in history the consequences of human limits ; or of man, the creature, subject to the biases of his nature. The poem attempts a most unusual feat : to analyze the naked soul itself. It does so with an extraordinary combination of emotional detachment and inward vision. We who are conscious today of the world about us, she says, on occasion may become aware that we are experiencing an interval between the immortality whence we came and whither we will return. Such consciousness is uniquely the property of each individual. A man's soul is an identity that can never be known to others or shared by them. The adventure of living, wherein our souls are placed in mortal frames, condemns us to solitude. The truth is that though men, as creatures, share destinies in common, man as the steward of his soul is profoundly isolated. We are born alone, and alone do we die. But the important thing is that, change as we may inwardly or outwardly over the years, our identities endure. Identity is thus perception, idea, and an act of God.

This Consciousness that is aware
Of Neighbours and the Sun
Will be the one aware of Death
And that itself alone

Is traversing the interval
Experience between
And most profound experiment
Appointed unto Men—

How adequate unto itself
It's properties shall be
Itself unto itself and none
Shall make discovery.

Adventure most unto itself
The Soul condemned to be—
Attended by a single Hound
It's own identity.

The Ultimate Reality

The microcosm of her identity, she implies, is a prototype of all identities, made one by the fact of like properties and qualities. The observation itself is profound, and is precisely the concept of identity set forth by Jonathan Edwards in his "Notes on the Mind", and in his argument which finds in sin the oneness of mankind. It may not have occurred to Emily Dickinson that in this poem of fewer than seventy words she performed a feat that volumes of theological exegesis have never made so immediate to apprehension. In art form she has depicted ultimate reality : the working of the Holy Spirit.

Identity as Eternity

Emily Dickinson's concept of identity involves a consideration of her attitude to the themes of eternity and the love of God. On these matters she had no doubts whatsoever. The following poem bears witness to her belief about eternity.

Forever—is composed of Nows—
Tis not a different time—
Except for Infiniteness—
And Latitude of Home—

That lays the groundwork. Then she builds further.

Heaven is so far of the Mind
That were the Mind dissolved—
The Site—of it—by Architect
Could not again be proved

It's vast—as our Capacity—
As fair—as our idea—
To Him of adequate desire
No further 'tis, than Here—

Eternity is at once both of and outside of time. Furthermore, like identity, it is idea. In fact, she perceived, it is identity.

The Blunder is in estimate.
Eternity is there
We say as of a Station.
Meanwhile he is so near
He joins me in my Ramble—
Divides abode with me—
No Friend have I that so persists
As this Eternity.

Eternity is personified, or at least animated, as is the single hound "identity". It is a close friend whether at home or abroad on a ramble. Eternity is in fact the animus : that part of her, call it mind, idea, identity, which makes her one with all the rest of humanity, whether as persons they have long since passed from existence or are yet to be born.

9

Nature in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

Nature as an Alien and Mysterious Force

Emily Dickinson regards nature as something mysterious, for the more deeply we scrutinize her processes, the more complex and bewildering they become. Essentially nature exists as an alien, baffling force that defies full comprehension. Emily Dickinson taunts those who laud nature the most, the gushing romantics, the scientists, and the visionary pantheists, for their assumed familiarity betrays a lack of perception. Regretfully she acknowledges that even those closest to nature, the poets and thinkers, also fail.

Nature as Betrayer and Enemy

Emily Dickinson felt that nature somehow participated in the mystery of divinity, but she never believed that the natural order paralleled the Divine or that intense study would develop mystic knowledge. She rarely expressed the inherent pantheism found in the transcendental oversoul, and only in a poem like "All Circumstances are the Frame" is God tentatively identified with nature. Many of her early poems found a hope for immortality in the seasonal movement from winter to spring. Many of her conventional nature poems praised nature as "the Gentlest Mother", who soothed and comforted her bruised children. She delighted in nature's external pageantry and effused sentimentally about the red breast of the robin and the butterfly's beautiful colours. Yet, her later poems showed a distrust of such analogies, ironically contrasting nature's ordered majesty with man's doomed mortality. Nature mocked rather than comforted man. Usually her better poems stressed nature's decaying and corruptive power. Death lay at the core of nature, continually threatening man with extinction. Many poems like "The Morning after Wo" and "I dreaded that first Robin, so" analyze nature's betrayal of those hearts that loved her best. In a poem about the frost's beheading a flower, "Apparently with no surprise", she even questioned if nature had any meaning at all, for a universe that proceeds indifferently and is untouched by such crimes haunts one with terror.

Nature's Fleeting Essence

The destructive power of nature's winds, rains, and lightning storms also impressed her. Still, her principal response to nature was a fascination with its continual change, the daily passage of the sun, the sudden alterations wrought by storms, the miracle of spring growth, and the deceptive appearance of Indian summer. She was intrigued by the illusory, fleeting essence of nature and awed by its connection with the divine process. The unusual and the odd areas of nature attracted her, and she transmuted unpoetic subjects like crickets, flies, weeds, and rats into art. Though acutely observant and aware of precise detail, she distrusted scientific analysis and scoffed at its attempts to codify all nature. She tempered her genuine enthusiasm for the beauty of external nature with an awareness of its innate mystery and strangeness. Never certain of any clear correspondence among God, nature, and man, she remained a skeptic who both admired and doubted.

Nature—Not a Moral Guide

Emily's refusal to employ nature as a guide for moral behaviour and her unusual skill in presenting vivid sense impressions highlight the differences between her and other writers of nature poetry in nineteenth-century America. Her poems on birds, flowers, insects, and natural processes rarely become didactic or insist upon divine analogues, as Bryant does in "To a Waterfo and Emerson in "The Rhodora". Often her nature poems sentimental and her domestic conceits excessively developed and overly feminine. For example, the image of the sunset as a housewife cleaning the sky in "She sweeps with many-coloured Brooms" is laboriously extended for twelve lines and offends artistic taste with its cloying metaphors about dusting the pond and playing spotted brooms. But she could etch genre portraits and achieve local colour effects with the best regional artists, while her feeling for picturesque detail and whimsical tone raised scores of these sketches to the level of good poetry.

Nature : The Master Illusionist

The drama of sunrise and sunset, particularly, attracted her. One poem, "I'll tell you how the Sun rose", uses a series of action verbs and domestic images to convey the quick surprise and changing colour of the dawn. The diffusing rays of the sun unravel as decorative ribbons in a milliner's shop ; the colour is almost palpable and drowns the steeples in its surging amethyst ; and the changing lights dart from tree to tree like squirrels. Even the final image of the hills untying their bonnets, which veers slightly toward the sentimental, exactly reproduces the fuzziness and haze that the glow of the rising sun causes behind the hills. The remainder of the poem falters as the sunset is described as a priest gently leading his flock home. A better poem on the same subject opens with this arresting conceit :

> Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple
> Leaping like Leopards to the Sky
> Then at the feet of the old Horizon
> Laying her spotted Face to die

KASHMIR

The wondrous interplay of motion, colour, and heat captured in these lines is intensified by the spectacular image of the leopard. His spotted yellow and brown body leaps out in an exuberant display of agility and majestic power to connote sensuously the grandeur of the sun's passage. The final image of the sun as the "Juggler of Day" relates nature's seeming defiance of the laws of gravity by suspending the sun in mid-air to the art of a juggler in deceiving his audience. Nature, for the poet, becomes the master illusionist, since it merely pretends motion for the benefit of earth-bound humans. Both these poems are characteristic of Emily Dickinson's gift for expansive, highly original images as well as of her tendency to neglect ordered structure.

Nature's Awesome, Fluid Reality

The dramatic occurrences of summer rains and lightning storms impressed her. The unleashed power of these storms, with their complete dominion over man's world, occasioned a sense of "circumference" and religious fear which deepened their picturesque effects. "The Wind begun to knead the Grass" employs touches of local colour, which, together with a fantastic array of action verbs, exhibit the mysterious chaos of a sudden summer downpour :

> The Wagons quickened on the Street—
> The Thunders gossipped low—
> The Lightning showed a Yellow Head—
> And then a livid Toe—

As the waters "wreck" the sky and lightning "quarters" a tree, the poet observes half-reverently and half-humorously that somehow the storm "overlooked my Father's house." A later storm poem, "There came a Wind like a Bugle", enlarges the feeling of reverence and surprise that any life survives such onslaughts. Synaesthetic phrases like "Green Chill", "Emerald Ghost", "Doom's electric Moccasin", vividly designate the tension-filled pause before the storm breaks. Reality here becomes "fluid and illusory, on the point of disappearing."

Nature's Elusiveness

Bees, birds, and insects seemed to free her imagination, as she wrote some of her best genre poems about them. She was particularly fond of bees and delighted in caricaturing their incessant activity.

> Bees are Black, with Gilt Surcingles—
> Buccaneers of Buzz.
> Ride abroad in ostentation
> And subsist on Fuzz.

Two of her descriptions of birds, the oriole in "One of the ones that Midas touched", and the blue jay in "No Brigadier throughout the Year", dazzle with their exuberant images and extravagant conceits. Her most famous nature portrait is that of the hummingbird :

A Route of Evanescence
With a revolving Wheel—
A Resonance of Emerald—
A Rush of Cochineal—
And every Blossom on the Bush
Adjusts its tumbled Head—
The mail from Tunis, probably.

Besides remaining a vivid poetic response to nature, it also conveys her sense of nature's mystery and elusiveness.

Man Versus Nature

In her best nature poems Emily Dickinson skilfully deepens her concrete detail and sensuous surface imagery by contrasting the world of man with that of nature. For example, "A Bird came down the Walk" can be read literally as an exact description of the quick, furtive movements of a bird as it eats, hops about a garden, and then flies gracefully away. But drawing the poem's various strands together, one sees how skilfully Emily Dickinson has moved beyond mere physical description. Basically the poem considers the ambivalence of nature's beauty and grace having such a destructive core. Beneath its tranquil surface exists a world of fear and continual warfare. Yet, nature effortlessly combines these disparate traits as the bird, which ferociously eats the worm, also achieves aesthetic immortality in its flight. Man's spying and his useless offer of a crumb lead to the bird's final rejection and illuminate another theme : nature's superior self-sufficiency over man's fumbling awkwardness.

The Frustrating Cleavage between Man and Nature

One of Emily Dickinson's most distinctive nature groupings deals with the neglected and grotesque aspects of nature—the rat, mushroom, fly, bat, snake, weeds, frog, stones, spider, and caterpillar. Although romantic writers shunned these aspects of nature and earnest moralists ignored their existence, Emily Dickinson revitalized the old cliches about nature. In our own time poets often juxtapose "garlic sapphires in the mud", mingling the ugly with the beautiful, but in the late nineteenth century such writing was not popular. In "The Rat is the concisest Tenant" the rat mocks man's complacent trust in law and social patterns. As if baiting conventional romantic writers, Emily Dickinson wins our approval and admiration for this repulsive rodent. Throughout, the satire is double-edged ; she feigns puzzlement over the rat's parasitical traits, while ridiculing the chain-of-being concept and man's social laws.

The Rat is the concisest Tenant.
He pays no Rent.
Repudiates the Obligation—
On Schemes intent

The brief declarative phrases fit the rat's exact nature, which casually ignores all that is unessential to his own ends. Not only does he fail to pay for food and lodging but he completely denies any moral responsibility. His "schemes" balk human intelligence, since man cannot ignore such amoral acts; and they annoy human superiority, since man's hate cannot move him. Throughout the poem the overuse of legal terms and mixture of exact and approximate rhyme mock man's efforts to "decree" proper social responsibility for the rat. The poem concludes that the rat is "Lawful as Equilibrium". He lives outside ordinary restrictions and poses to us the frustrating cleavage between man and nature.

Nature's Hidden Terror

A far more disturbing investigation of nature's famous mystery occurs in "A narrow Fellow in the Grass". Here Emily Dickinson examines the terror and awe that a snake's presence can occasion. A series of artistic progressions develop the snake image into a symbol of the unknown. At first the snake is treated playfully; his sudden "notice" and quick movements fascinate the viewer and even convey a sense of regality and power as his coiling body is likened to a "Whip lash/Unbraiding in the Sun." Still, disturbing undertones are sounded by the adjective "narrow" and the snake's hidden, gliding motion. His fondness for primitive swamps, where no corn ever grows, hints at the snake's biblical associations with evil and the desolate places of the earth. The concluding stanzas contrast the barefoot poet and her love for the rest of nature with the dread that this creature inspires:

> But never met this Fellow
> Attended, or alone
> Without a tighter breathing
> And Zero at the Bone—

The final image connotes the absolute terror that the snake brings. A blank negation, liking Melville's chilling description of the whiteness of the whale, paralyzes man's spirit and pushes him closer to a frightening vacuum. From an interested, mildly amused treatment of his external characteristics, the poem develops the snake's association with man's fear of the unknown and evil itself. Here the sense of hidden terror behind nature's surface beauty fascinates and frightens the onlooker.

Nature's Misfits

[illegible] dealing with the bat, is perhaps her finest [illegible] [illegible] never achieves [illegible] perplexing [illegible] man's limitations in comprehending [illegible] stanzas imaginatively catalogue the bat's form, colour, and activities, stressing his grotesque qualities. The heavy alliteration, Latinate phrasing, and cryptic shifts from line to line heighten this strangeness and lead into a puzzled discussion of God's reasons for creating the bat. One possible theme is, of course, the inability of man's finite mind to discern just what God has planned for all aspects of creation. The bat appears useless and eccentric to us, but just as we are unable to hear his song, perhaps we cannot understand how "beneficent" he is within the total order of the universe.

Nature's Cyclical Processes

Though the daily movement of the sun, the power of storms, and the strangeness of creation impressed her, the larger seasonal cycles and the fleeting aspects of material beauty drew her most imaginative response. The miracle of the barren winter containing the seeds of fruitful summer and the rich crops foretelling the death of harvest never ceased to fascinate her. Realizing that no one could fully understand nature's processes, she restrained her enthusiastic response to the change of seasons with undertones of this mystery. If the essence of nature defied explanation, at least poetic insight furnished perceptive readers with some outline of its "haunted house". This challenge of describing nature's elusiveness occasioned some of her most speculative poems.

Deceptive Hope of Spring

Of course, spring was a favoured season, since it displayed the wonder of rebirth and openly promised the warm beauty of summer. She called spring a time sent directly from God and particularly welcomed March as the herald of spring. From light local colour sketches like "An altered look about the hills" she moved to more thoughtful considerations of the whole cycle in "New feet within my garden go." The opening stanza of this poem expresses the poet's wonder at the first stirrings of plant life and the initial song of a bird. In the second stanza her pleasure diminishes as she contrasts the new children playing upon the green with the new dead sleeping in graves. Finally her joyous response to spring is muted by the knowledge that it is only a part of a complete cycle that punctually arrives and leads again to winter. Since the inexorable seasonal change forbids permanent growth or lasting beauty, spring's hope deceives and brings pensiveness.

Poignant Loss of Summer

Though summer brought a full blossoming of her beloved plants and flowers, Emily Dickinson never successfully captured its special atmosphere. One of her earliest attempts, "The Gentian weaves her fringes", celebrates the death of summer with a mock heroic sermon, funeral procession, and burial service. Another impressionistic sketch, "It will be Summer—eventually", pictorially views the season from the vantage point of midwinter to hint at the underlying cyclical process. Her only memorable poem on summer characteristically deals with the sense of loss that summer's departure brings :

As imperceptibly as Grief
The Summer lapsed away—
Too imperceptible at last
To seem like Perfidy—

Summer's departure is not a sudden betrayal which brings outrage but is so 'imperceptible' that the loss goes nearly unnoticed. The middle stanzas further define this loss as a "harrowing Grace", coming with afternoon's quiet and the approaching twilight. The feeling of estrangement deepens when nature is personified as a house guest who stays for a time, winning our love and devotion, but who refuses to remain. Though gracious, the guest's manner becomes increasingly aloof and disdainful. The slight change of 'the summer' into 'our summer' emphasizes the intimacy, while summer's fragile passage "without a Wing/Or service of a Keel" conveys a sense of aesthetic satisfaction. In very few poems is the poignancy and ephemeral quality of the seasonal movement so finely presented.

Despairing Light of Winter

The winter season never had much appeal for Emily Dickinson, although she wrote two imaginative descriptions of a winter snow-storm, "It sifts from Leaden Sieves" and "Like Brooms of Steel". Only one of her better poems uses the framework of winter to explore the despair that the season often brings. Like the poem on spring's mystic illumination, "There's a certain slant of light" focuses on the paradox of light. Instead of brightening and clarifying, these slanted winter rays oppress and afflict, threatening the soul's faith. Numerous religious associations deepen this despair and indicate the light's function as a testing ground for the soul. These despairing moments not only bring pain but are valuable imperial things that inspire awe and complete submission. Nature herself bows to this power, which is finally compared to death, since the light pushes man's faith to its farthest limits. The poem again illustrates man's inadequate control over nature and the desperation with which he fights for survival. Mordecai Marcus has commented that man's inability to know an existence beyond death causes this despair, while man's psychological and emotional pain is paralleled by the underlying decay process in nature.

Function of Natural Phenomena

Emily Dickinson constantly examined man's relation to the world of natural phenomena. Eschewing easy religious affirmation and effusive romantic enthusiasm, she looked closely at natural objects, contemplated their function, then recorded her responses with scrupulous exactness. Once, when discussing a poem's movement from delight to wisdom, Robert Frost remarked that "'like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting." The following three poems on the grandeur of the northern lights, the simplicity of a stone, and the pensive song of crickets exemplify the slow artistic melting of material image into provocative thought.

Man's Mortality and Nature's Glory

"Of Bronze—and Blaze" considers a display of northern lights, which sometimes could be seen during the fall in Amherst.

The poem treats one of the oldest poetic subjects—the insufficiency of man when compared to the infinite grandeur of God's creation. Numerous psalms like "The heavens declare the glory of God ; and the firmament sheweth his handywork" have similar themes, but Emily Dickinson concentrates on man's response to these splendours and adds wry touches of irony that are quite alien to these devotional songs. Like the psalms the poem moves from a brief description of natural phenomena and their attributes to their effect upon the observer below, as he vainly attempts to imitate their grandeur. The second section of the poem enlarges these philosophical considerations, contrasting man's temporary achievements and mortality with the vastness and glory of eternity. The poem illustrates the permanence of eternal beauty against man's hopeless longing for these things. Although there is some significance in his attempt, his efforts to imitate the Divine necessarily fail. Man can be inspired by the handiwork of God, but ultimately he must perceive the indifference of nature and the transitory aspects of life which render these goals unattainable. Man's mortality defeats him and the appalling distance between God and man remains.

Nature's Simplicity and Man's Complexity

Exploring the idea of nature's perfect harmony with the Divine plan, Emily Dickinson in "How Happy is the little Stone," contrasts the stone's elemental obedience with man's disordered existence. The poem revolves around these two poles of nature's simplicity and man's complexity, examining the relation of the inanimate stone to the cosmic order. The stone's simple aims and blind reliance upon universal law bring freedom and happiness. Since it never exceeds its limitations or potential, the stone achieves a rare self-sufficiency which mocks man's feverish careers and involved concerns. Throughout, the regular iambic tetrameter and fairly exact couplet rhyme exhibit the theme of restraint, or freedom within limits. The satisfaction that results from the stone's close attunement to nature is presented from the opening lines. The stone is "happy" and wanders aimlessly, unconcerned about companionship and untouched by the complexities of human life. Even its fundamental brown colour is the afterthought of a passing universe. But the stone's independence has an ironic side, since its freedom exists only within proscribed limits and without choice, thus being a mockery of the term. It associates merely by accident and is passively exposed to both warmth and cold. The irony of the poem is double-edged, for just as man's harried life seems hopelessly cluttered, the stone's casual existence is without value, for it involves no struggle. These qualities of freedom and responsibility make human life more perplexing and expose man to ridicule and failure, though they also allow personal achievement. "Consider the little stone", Emily Dickinson seems to say, "and see how man suffers by comparison." Still, the poem hints that perhaps man's dissatisfied struggle is better than the rote happiness of absolute decree.

Man's Cosmic Loneliness

"Further in Summer than the Birds" treats of the cricket and demonstrates again Emily's fascination with nature's odd creatures and the mysterious passage of summer into winter. She once remarked that "Autumn is among us, though almost unperceived—and the Cricket sings in the morning, now, a most pathetic conduct," here as in the poem associating the cricket's song with the sadness of seasonal change. Basically the poem records the poet's response to the monotonous chirping of the crickets on a hot August noon near the end of summer. The tone throughout is hushed and solemn, imbued with a poignant sense of longing and awe by the pervasive religious undertones. The image of the cricket is transformed into a striking symbol of the estrangement and sorrow that man feels with the approach of winter : an echo of his own intimations of mortality.

Further in Summer than the Birds
Pathetic from the Grass
A minor Nation celebrates
Its unobtrusive Mass.

The insects exist "further" in summer than the birds because they live hidden in the soil close to nature's essence, while the birds build in the trees, inhabiting the sky and remaining longer into autumn. Unlike the beautiful lyrics of the birds, the cricket's song, produced by the rubbing together of their wings, is pathetic and often ignored. Their prophetic song is intimately related to their mating cycle for the males attract by this sound during their fall mating period. Also, the cricket's song is vitally dependent on temperature changes ; when the temperature drops the crickets become sluggish and correspondingly their song diminishes. So, because of their passion's season, the majority of them die soon after the fall mating during the first protracted spell of freezing weather. In a sense, then, their mating foretells their coming death. So it can be compared to the sacrifice of the Mass, where Christ's love perpetuates the death sacrifice of Calvary by the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into his body and blood. The religious significance of the act is deepened by terms like "Ordinance", "Canticle" and "Druidic". The spoken "Mass", with its murmuring, barely audible Latin intonation, matches the steady, indistinguishable chirping of these insects.

No Ordinance be seen
So gradual the Grace
A pensive Custom it becomes
Enlarging Loneliness.

Yet the interested human listener is still alienated from the cricket's message. He can recognize no established rite for the administration of their sacrament ("Ordinance"), while the moral [illegible] by the ritual ("Grace") are barely understood. [illegible] a "pensive Custom", one that saddens and brings introspection. The song of the crickets increases man's fundamental loneliness, since he is excluded from full participation in their ritual. In a sense, then, their song, as Yvor Winters has noted, demonstrates the cleavage of man from nature. Yet this "enlarging" also brings relief and comfort. Man finds his own estrangement from life echoed by nature itself, since the intensity of the insects' mating song ultimately foretells their death. Thus man can perceive that his isolation is not a unique phenomenon but cosmic and universal.

10

Emily Dickinson's Treatment of Love

Principal Motifs

The majority of Emily Dickinson's love poems handle the effects of passion upon a human soul. Three principal motifs can be discerned in these poems : the anticipation of the lover's future visit and possible marriage; the climactic meeting of the lovers and their resulting separation ; and finally the sublimation of the human passion in a celestial marriage as she becomes the Bride of Christ.

The Anticipation of the Lover's Visit

The first grouping contains her most sentimental and derivative love poems. Some deal with erotic expectations, employing the bee-flower image to convey physical desire as in "Come slowly—Eden !" and "A Bee his burnished Carriage"; others with longing for imagined visits, "If you were coming in the Fall"; and some with an abstract examination of transport and awe like " 'Tis so much joy ! 'Tis so much joy!" Two poems convey her exultation and triumph as she imagines herself a true wife and boasts of the superhuman intensity of her passion. "I'm ceded—I've stopped being Theirs", though closely related to her Bride of Christ poems, emphasizes the actual attainment of the wife status. The poem contrasts the two sacraments of baptism and marriage : her church baptism as a helpless infant in the arms of her father, where the sacrament was merely external and unwanted ; and her new, mature crowning as a woman in marriage, where the baptism was freely chosen and elevated her to queenhood. Baptism and coronation motifs are artistically interwoven and blended with suggestive hints of sexual surrender to capture a woman's exuberant happiness on the day of her marriage. "Dare you see a Soul *at the White Heat* ?" lacks the intricate structure of "I'm ceded—I've stopped being Theirs," but stands as a more moving emotional utterance. It passionately taunts the onlooker to view the searing intensity of her love without being blinded. She says that red is love's usual sign, but that her passion has vanquished this to blaze at white heat. The unhallowed fire of secular love and the holocaust of suffering have so perfected her soul that she is now ready for God's immortal light. The poem's vivid "forge" imagery dramatically stresses the strength of this earthly love, which transforms her emotional experience into a divine readiness for immortality or heaven.

Meeting of the Lovers

The largest grouping among her love poems is composed of those concerned with the actual meeting of the lovers. Usually recollected from the vantage point of separation and with the realization of the love's termination, they are dominated by a haunting sense of anguish. They constantly emphasize her sense of loyalty and dread of change and increasingly consider the spiritual aspects of love, rather than its human importance. "Again—his voice is at the door" is typical, being an exact recounting of a sublime emotional moment when two human beings are united by love. However, this brief ecstasy leaves the lover savouring the moment in a desperate attempt to make memory serve for reality. The opening stanzas, with their biographical suggestions, are the most moving.

Promise of Heavenly Bliss

"There came a Day at Summer's full" views a similar experience from a religious perspective, one that boldly assumes that the lovers' earthly renunciation will gain them heavenly bliss. However, the poem is not basically religious, for she insists, even demands, that their temporary ecstasy and long separation portend a greater spiritual happiness. God is curiously absent from the poem as she considers heaven acceptable only if it fully consummates their love. Here the loss is accepted, not because denial is beneficial, but because it must bring eternal, perfect union.

Misery of Separation

By contrast, "I got so I could take his name", catches the terrible misery that the separation causes, depicting the soul's bleak efforts to discover some measure of religious consolation. The poet finds no assurance in conventional religions; her direct appeal to God for solace remains unanswered. The first three stanzas convey the pain of renunciation and the tensions of the final meeting better than any of her other love poems :

I got so I could take his name—
Without—Tremendous gain—
That Stop—sensation—on my Soul—
And Thunder—in the Room—

I got so I could walk across
That Angle in the floor,
Where he turned so, and I turned—how—
And all our Sinew tore—

I got so I could stir the Box--
In which his letters grew
Without that forcing, in my breath—
As Staples—driven through—

The idiomatic "I got so" indicates her qualified acceptance of the loss, a position still tenuous and unstable, while "take" suggests the sacredness of his name, as if one profaned by using it. The dashes after "name" and "without" provide a pause before the overwhelming effects of his love explode in 'Tremendous gain", "Stop-sensation", and "Thunder." The second stanza recounts their agonized last meeting and focuses on the implications of "turn". Their physical withdrawal signifies a parallel "turn" into renunciation and suggests an eventual turn to the spiritual hope of the final stanzas. The exact description of the angle in the floor brilliantly reworks the sentimental cliches of treasuring locks of hair and faded rose buds, while the translation of the lover's emotional misery into real physical pain ("Sinew tore") indicates the depth of their passion. The third stanza alters the mood. As the memory of the meeting dims, she desperately strives to re-experience the former ecstasy, even to feel the despairing pain, by touching his letters. The word "stir" signifies her pathetic attempts to make the letters serve for his physical presence. The contrast of the listless "stir" with the vibrant excitement of his former visits reveals the gradual alteration that passing time brings. The image of the staples being driven through dramatizes the "Stop-sensation" of the opening stanza as his iron male force cuts through and forever binds her inert "page" life. The remainder of the poem treats the present, where she hopelessly seeks some religious answer. The final lines picture God as too distant, "too vast", to even care about "so minute after/As Misery."

Denial of Love for Spiritual Happiness

A final poem in this group, "I should have been too glad, I see", marks a transition into her Bride of Christ poems, although the emotional splendour of her secular love modulates its religious emphasis. Here the religious consolation so eagerly sought in the previous poem is more satisfactorily explored. In a sense, the poem is an elaborate rationalization, an attempt to explain why the love was denied. She argues that their relationship was so sublime and so complete that it endangered their love for God. Thus God removed this paradise on earth to reassert his value and to allow them a chance for spiritual happiness. The ironic phrasing and her own pleading tone indicate that this resignation is still somewhat forced. After listing consoling axioms and using the comparison of the crucifixion followed by Easter, she still concludes that one has difficulty in understanding and obtaining belief. The quotation marks around "faith" (as if it were found in some forgotten volume) and the image of the wounded animal crying out in anguish suggest that faith has brought little relief. The first stanza indicates the general approach. Using status images, she immediately presents the dilemma. With the continuance of her love she would have been exalted far beyond the minor role that this transitory life had arranged for her. The Calvinistic concept of life as pain-filled, with the only happiness dependent upon an omnipotent God, underscores this whole passage. Deprecatingly she asserts that her insignificant life, which is hardly worthy of the happiness she was experiencing, would have eventually embarrassed this perfect love, which is religious as well as emotional.

If it had continued, she would have been critical of all other remaining moments. The extreme condensation of these lines renders interpretation difficult. The next two stanzas expand these ideas, showing that her profane love would have obliterated the sacred and would have eliminated the fear of hell so necessary for securing heaven. The final stanza is the weakest, as somehow the conventional platitudes that should render solace do not bring faith or acceptance.

Sublimation of Passion : Bride Poems

Her most artistic love poems are those dealing with brides and marriage. As the realization of the lover's loss deepened and as his physical presence became mere memory, she gradually sublimated her human passion into a divine experience. In this new cycle of poems the human lover remains shadowy as her vision of the lovers' heavenly marriage changes to an actual celestial union with God. Like Edward Taylor and other religious poets, she dramatically merges the sacred and profane aspects of human passion, transforming her desire for human marriage into a Bride of Christ vision. Throughout most of these poems the term "bride" is viewed from various perspectives : first as an actual woman being married ; then as the bride of death, which allows her to enter the third stage as wedded to God in paradise. In the words of Charles Anderson, "The struggle between earthly and heavenly love remains central to the most successful poems in the marriage group. More accurately it is the source of the tension she sets up by embodying the heavenly theme in earthly terms, then making these into images with celestial reference.........Two strategies of language are responsible for this success, the language of Status and the Signs which denote the elevation from one level to another."

The Divine Lover

The adjustment to the idea of a divine lover was gradual, and in the beginning she insists that after a long separation the heavenly lovers will celebrate a spiritual marriage before angelic hosts. "Of all the Souls that stand create" is perhaps the best among the many poems dealing with this heavenly marriage. It uses the framework of the Last Judgment to assert triumphantly the validity of her choice. After such pain and denial she is convinced that eternity will vindicate her selection. Interwoven throughout the poem is the basic contrast between temporal life, characterized by images of obscurity and heaviness, and eternity's strength and clarity. She claims that she has chosen the best, the one soul whose value can be recognized only in eternity. Again utilizing the doctrine of election and God's irresistible grace, she finally cries out for all to view the one person, the atom she has chosen. This fits the imagistic pattern of election, since the atom was then thought to be the ultimate indissoluble element of matter, and its unique, eternal characteristics contrast with the damp, mouldable clay of most lives. Yet a touch of irony exists, for what she claims finally is only an atom, a small insignificant particle, one among millions.

Exultation of Renunciation

Emily Dickinson's particular success in capturing the exultation and passionate satisfaction that renunciation brings is nowhere better displayed than in the following poem :

> Mine—by the Right of the White Election !
> Mine—by the Royal Seal !
> Mine—by the Sign in the Scarlet prison—
> . . . .
> Mine—here—in Vision—and in Veto !
> Mine—by the Grave's Repeal—
> Titled—Confirmed—
> Delirious Charter !
> Mine—long as Ages steal !

Just what is hers is never fully explained, but from the total sense of achievement one assumes that her mastery of pain has conferred upon her a special divine privilege, a marriage deed to eternity. The repeated assertion of "Mine" creates a rising rhetorical pattern, where the explanation of how she obtained her new rank also defines what this "Delirious Charter" is. "Right" and "White Election" present the key images of legal sanction and orthodox religious salvation which guide the whole poem. She merits this new estate as one who has argued her case before the bar or who has been specially saved. "White" has the secular association with bridal gowns and refers to her own symbolic use of the colour, besides alluding to the saved figures in white who appear before the Lamb of God in the book of Revelation. "By the Royal Seal" expands the legal concept with the hint of royalty and suggests a marriage ring or licence. The next two lines refer to her own tortured suffering, by which she merits this special privilege. Also, they vaguely allude to Christ's passion, which is more openly reflected in "Grave's Repeal." Like Miriam's song of victory over the Egyptians, the second stanza intensifies the "Mine" into a cry of jubilation. The cryptic first line implies that this "White Election" is hers "here" on earth because of her denial of human love ("in Veto"), but that she has this rank only in a spiritual sense ("in Vision"). This present state almost rivals immortality and is further paralleled by Christ's resurrection, which forever proved his divinity. The final lines transform the official ceremony into an ecstatic vision, and the poem concludes with eternity giving its majestic approval to her charter.

Transformation of Human into Divine Love

A companion poem, which more inherently blends spiritual love and human passion, is "Title divine—is mine!" Here the ritual of an actual marriage without the human bridegroom is so fully developed that one can almost feel the human passion being transformed into divine love. The rich cluster of images dealing with precious stones, royalty, and status intensify the poem's marriage

Title divine—is mine!
The Wife—without the Sign!
Acute Degree—conferred on me—
Empress of Calvary!

The opening lines defiantly vaunt her triumph with an exultation that the internal rhyme makes almost childishly boastful. In this poem the achievement is clarified and expressed as a "Title divine", a wife without the external symbols, rings, dresses, and ceremony, common to most brides. Her marriage is different, one so keenly felt that it brings both pleasure and pain. Her rejection of an earthly marriage had made her an "Empress" of suffering, worthy to be the Bride of Christ. The term "Calvary" also has biographical significance, since this was the name of the church in California where Charles Wadsworth became pastor in the year the poem was written. The middle section expands this imagery. She is royal though lacking a crown and betrothed without the usual swoon romantically associated with utmost happiness. The lines "Garnet to Garnet—/ Gold to Gold" symbolize wedding pledges and rings that officially seal the marriage and suggest a physical union. The concluding lines read :

Born—Bridalled—Shrouded—
In a Day—
Tri Victory
"My Husband"—women say—
Is *this*—the way?

The heavily accentuated first syllables intensify the thought. A bride is born to new life in marriage, "Bridalled", since she is subordinated to her husband, and "Shrouded", since her virgin life is now dead. On a spiritual level, this indicates that her complete submission to Christ transcends all of physical life in an instant (In a Day"). The final lines wistfully dream of an actual marriage as she imagines new brides rapturously caressing the sound of "My Husband". An ironic note creeps into "Is *this*—the way," as if her possession of Christ's love renders earthly marriage insignificant. Yet the lines are ambiguous, implying envy as well as disdain. Appropriately the poem ends with this delicate suggestion of the pain and pleasure that accompanies both states. The blend of passion and sacred love in these two poems is climaxed by another poem, "Given in Marriage unto Thee", which banishes actual marriage for a complete heavenly union. Now there is no hint of human love, only the beatific serenity of a nun voicing her vows to the bridegroom Christ.

11

Emily Dickinson's Treatment of Pain

Nature and Effect of Pain

In many of her poems, Emily Dickinson investigated the nature of pain, its stages, its effects upon the human soul, and finally its relation with death. She gradually learned how to master the pain of separation and in time analyzed the experience with artistic detachment. The resulting poems not only enabled her to weather the pain and to preserve her integrity but also helped turn deprivation into a spiritual triumph. In total they constituted a revealing illustration of one soul's courage.

Philosophy of Pain

For Emily Dickinson as for Hawthorne and James the knowledge of pain became a touchstone for estimating the depth of a human soul. No sham survived misery's terrible stress. "I measure every Grief I meet" presents her philosophy of pain and analyzes its specific characteristics. Primarily she notes that true pain becomes such an essential part of one's being that its departure causes a deeper loneliness in the soul. Since pain's intensity is unrelenting, one can never master it, nor even hope for time to assuage its power. Yet pain has value, since it provides the victim with an enlightenment to a "larger Pain." That is, from a personal experience of grief one comes to the realization of its universal human condition. Thus, it greatly strengthens man, enabling him to bear increased stresses and survive as an individual. In her poems pain almost assumes the legendary proportions of death. One of the poems closes with :

A piercing Comfort it affords
In passing Calvary—

To note the fashions—of the Cross—
And how they're mostly worn—
Still fascinated to presume
That Some—are like My Own—

Thus pain elevates man to new heights, establishing an aristocratic bond with others who experience similar anguish. Her belief in the abiding nature of pain reflects basic Calvinistic doctrine and indicates her break with Transcendental optimism. Though her struggle reaffirmed man's inner greatness, she remained uncertain of final victory over these disintegrating forces.

Salvation No Better than Death

Several of her poems on pain dealt with the moment after a near disaster, the very second when a soul has passed through the terrible abyss of the unknown or death's annihilation. Poor organization and shifting metaphors mar the majority of these poems, but sections hauntingly evoke a soul's collapse under extreme pressures. They reflect Emily Dickinson's preoccupation with moments of change and her fascination with the borderline between life and death." 'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch" describes the psychological shock of a soul saved from imminent destruction by a mere whim of God. Prepared for disaster, the soul miraculously survives, only to realize that the continuing pain will bring renewed torture. Paradoxically, salvation appears no better than death. The opening description of the maelstrom aptly illuminates the nightmarish quality of the experience, but the other metaphors lack dramatic effectiveness. Throughout the poem one senses how close to madness pain has pushed this soul.

Anguished Terror of the Soul

"It was not Death, for I stood up" more artistically examines the state of shock and numbness that extreme grief causes. The pattern of the poem reflects the chaos of tortured emotions and the wretchedness of despair. Only a series of negations can describe what the soul suffers. The experience is neither death nor life, cold nor warmth, noon nor midnight, but fragments of them all that enlarge the soul's terror. She ransacked her poetic imagination to express suitably these sensations and finally let images of death, night, and coldness convey despair's effect :

> It was not Death, for I stood up,
> And all the Dead, lie down—
> It was not Night, for all the Bells
> Put out their Tongues, for Noon.

The negation of one state is immediately followed by its opposite to widen the anguish of the total experience. These disjointed remarks manifest the soul's dazed attempt to master the tensions destroying its balance. Funereal images dominate the central section and somewhat morbidly equate her experience to a corpse's being shaved and fitted in the coffin. She exhibits the soul's terrible desolation by comparing its state to midnight, to staring space, and finally to "Grisly frosts—first Autumn morns, Repeal (ing) the Beating Ground." This striking metaphor compares the slow pulse of life still throbbing in her numbed body to seeds covered by the death of winter and ice. The final stanza employs a shipwreck image to illustrate the chaos and hopelessness of despair :

> But, most, like Chaos—Stopless—cool—
> Without a Chance, or Spar—
> Or even a Report of Land—
> To justify—Despair.

The Soul's Response to Pain

Another poem, "The first Day's Night had come", considers the courage required to endure an initial shock and the relief in mastering the first day's pain. However, when another day of pain comes the mind collapses, realizing that this same effort must be made daily for the rest of its life. "That after Horror—that 'twas us," the final poem in this category, more closely relates to her love life than the others. It also describes the numbed responses of a soul, reeling from the horror of near disaster. The italicized "us" of the poem implies that a deceptively stable relationship came close to disaster and was barely salvaged by a moral force. The central metaphor builds on the paradox of external strength and security hiding weakness and instability. The first stanza captures the mixture of good and evil possible in human relationships :

> That after Horror—that 'twas *us*—
> That passed the mouldering Pier—
> Just as the Granite Crumb let go—
> Our Saviour, by a Hair—

The poem opens with the stunned pair surveying the thin margin of their escape. The apparently solid pier upon which their relationship rests is actually decayed and collapses beneath the first serious pressure. The "Granite Crumb" image expands this "pier" concept, for the solid granite stone has a crumb's weakness. The image suggests a tombstone's falling into a sunken grave, while the "let go" implies their total abandonment. The second stanza reiterates the idea of a sudden fall, also hinting at Christ's saving grace ("A second more, had dropped too deep/For Fisherman to plumb"). To convey the terror of this escape, the poet shifts her viewpoint to contemplate what an entrance into "Conjecture's presence" (God) would have been like without hope of salvation.

Learning to Live with Pain

Many of these poems on pain bypassed its underlying causes to examine pain's physical and emotional effects. Rather than dealing with extreme psychological tension, they stressed the courage required to endure the burdens of pain. Once the initial shock receded the more difficult task of living with this death-in-life began. In "I dreaded that first Robin, so" the soul waits for external nature to mirror its misery, only to observe all the beauties of spring unfolding to mock her bereaved state. Noting that not a single blossom sympathetically defers to her martyrdom, she concludes that nature is basically indifferent and man is isolated from its harmony. Here an ironic tone freshens the pathetic fallacy. "I tie my Hat—I crease my Shawl" also exemplifies Emily Dickinson's genre skill in allowing insignificant details to highlight the bleak courage required when all reason for living has gone. Her New England stoicism and Puritan resolution force her to closely measure this pain and by her courageous endurance make this wasted life assume nobility.

Inevitability of Pain

Undoubtedly, Emily Dickinson's finest poem about pain and one of her artistic achievements is "After great pain, a formal feeling comes." Here the soul's numbed response after an enervating shock exemplifies a fundamental law : that pain is an unavoidable aspect of human existence. A carefully modulated structure, interlocking images of ceremony and crystallization, and acute psychological observations present the situation. The overall form of the poem exhibits the disjointed death throes of various parts of the body—the nerves, the heart, and the feet—where the dull instinctive reactions of the entire system gradually subside to a static, frozen immobility. The stages of pain pass from a funereal atmosphere, concentrating on images of ceremony and tombs in stanza one, to the mechanical wooden world of stanza two, and finally to the frozen death of stanza three, where leaden images climax in snow's blank desolation. Stately iambic pentameter, matched by rhyming couplets, opens and closes the poem, underscoring the ceremonial aspects of great pain.

12

Violence and Abstraction in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

Hazard's Conquest and the Music of Silence

Contrary to popular belief, Emily Dickinson bravely faces the drama of isolation in her poetry, and her inward look can focus its object to such a degree that it acquires the temperature of fire—or ice ; until the object itself ceases to be an object because it is decomposed into the spectrum of abstraction. Like Mallarme, she becomes the musician of the silence. Consequently she developed an intense awareness of language as no other American poet had done before her, and pushed it to the critical point where she realized, like the French symbolists, that the "undeveloped freight" of a syllable was an atomic charge fit to make our minds "Crumble with the weight." The New Englander who wrote

> Soul, Wilt thou toss again ?
> By just such a hazard
> Hundreds have lost indeed—
> But tens have won an all—

had John Calvin, Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards behind her. When the "imps in eager caucus" raffled for her soul, as the second and last stanza of this piece has it, she knew that Hazard could conquer instead of being conquered, and that the dice might be loaded against her.

Etherial Blow of the Emersonian Knife

Emily was not committed to pure intellect, yet she had an Emersonian "knife" in her mind, and could be surgical at the very climax of ecstasy :

> He fumbles at your Soul
> As Players at the Keys
> Before they drop full Music on—
> He stuns you by degrees—
> Prepares your brittle Nature
> For the Etherial Blow
> By fainter Hammers—further heard—
> Then nearer—Then so slow
> Your Breath has time to straighten—
> Your Brain—to bubble Cool—
> Deals—One—imperial—Thunderbolt—
> That scalps your naked soul—

The conclusion of this poem speaks of the stillness that overtakes the universe "when Winds take Forests in their Paws", and the sensitive reader cannot help responding in the same way to the "etherial blow" of her utterance. The gradual heightening of those invisible hands playing on a keyboard into "fainter hammers, further heard" which make a delicate Welsh chime, not unlike the "rafters of satin, roof of stone" of the memorable "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers", and finally into the scalping "thunderbolt" of the acme, constitutes a surprise by progression unrivalled by most subsequent artists.

Orgy of Visual Delight

Emily Dickinson packs momentum into her short lines by extending the duration potential of key-words and carrying out violent transitions from image to image. What impression do we have of her Marinistic oriole ? No more dazzling bird ever came our way ; it is one of those "that Midas touched", it becomes "an alighting Mine", it goes through a crescendo of impersonations from "Pleader" to "Dissembler" to "Epicure", "Thief" and a whole "Oratory", until the climax stamps it as "Jesuit of Orchards." There can be no doubt : this bird is baroque ! The further fireworks accumulate, or supersede one another, as they might do in Crashaw : we see the "splendour of Burmah"; "the Meteor of Birds," and finally a "Golden Fleece."

Violent Gestures of Imagination

This orgy of visual delight, however, does not represent Emily at her best. Stare at your bird with what she elsewhere calls a "torrid eye", the absolute look of abstraction, and you will cruelly dissect it :

> Split the Lark—and you'll find the Music—
> Bulb after Bulb, in Silver rolled—
> Scantily dealt to the Summer Morning
> Saved for your Ear when Lutes be old.
>
> Loose the Flood—you shall find it patent—
> Gush after Gush, reserved for you—
> Scarlet Experiment ! Sceptic Thomas !
> Now, do you doubt that your Bird was true ?

The violence—accompanied by characteristic synaesthesia—is much more an experiment of Emily Dickinson herself than it is of poor "sceptic Thomas", One thinks of other violent gestures of her imagination : for instance, those "leaping leopards" that blaze the sky in "Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple", or the terror of mental paralysis in "It was not Death, for I stood up" :

> It was not Frost, for on my Flesh
> I felt Siroccos—crawl—
> Nor Fire—for just my Marble feet
> Could keep a Chancel, cool—...

> When everything that ticked—has stopped—
> And Space stares all around—
> Or Grisly frosts—first Autumn morns,...
>
> But, most, like Chaos—Stopless—cool—
> Without a Chance, or Spar—
> Or even a Report of Land—
> To justify—Despair.

Love of Extremes

Emily Dickinson's detachment and cult of death led to a great asceticism of style. The following poem reveals how her words are charged with semantic intensity :

> Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat ?
> Then crouch within the Door—
> Red—is the Fire's common tint—
> But when the vivid Ore
> Has vanquished Flame's conditions,
> It quivers from the Forge
> Without a colour, but the light
> Or unannointed Blaze...
>
> Until the Designated Light
> Repudiate the Forge—

That she was in love with extremes is evident from "From Blank to Blank A Threadless Way" and "The Zeroes—taught us—Phosphorus". In "Of Bronze and Blaze" she breathes the polar air of Herodiade :

> Of Bronze—and Blaze—
> The North—Tonight—
> So adequate—it forms—
> So preconcerted with itself
> So distant—to alarms—
>
> ...I take vaster attitudes—
> And strut upon my stem—
> Disdaining Men, and Oxygen,
> For arrogance of them—

Here the "little arctic flower" of "Transplanted" looms immense as a surrealist sunflower turning toward the Northern Lights—a self description of the poet rising above sensuousness into the rarified sky of abstraction.

The Stratosphere of Meaning

Rarefaction, however, remains the important element. Words burn in thinner Oxygen, and we find ourselves in the stratosphere of meaning ; vision dissolves into the sense of an invisible presence, and we have really an abstract poem. Such is the following, where once again the singing bird is captured on the white page as pure activity polarizing circumambient reality ;

And lo, Her silver Principle
Supplanted all the rest.

At Half past Seven, Element
Nor Implement, be seen—
Circumference between.
And Place was where the Presence was.

But what about the dusk of "The Crickets sang" ?

A Vastness, as a Neighbour, came,
A Wisdom, without Face, or Name,
A Peace, as Hemispheres at Home
And so the Night Became.

The sense of mystery culminates in that one verb, *became*, which we have to define as absolute. It concentrates and resolves in itself the whole poem ; it is a coming and unfolding, an *advent*. To the Orphic mission, Emily Dickinson was passionately faithful. Her soul "selected her own society", until in the act of inner withdrawal it could ripen its pearl of vision :

...from an ample nation—
Choose One—
Then—close the Valves of her attention—
Like Stone—

Such absoluteness of sight was paid for by "putting out her eye" and by savouring solitude to the very dregs :

He visited—still flitting—
Then like a timid Man
Again, He tapped—'twas flurriedly—
And I became alone—

Here the wind is an uncertain angel of the formless ; the sterile Annunciation reaches its climax in the phrase *becoming alone*, which summarizes destiny by bringing the two words to their consummation.

Abstract and Mathematical Imagination

But Emily Dickinson's abstract imagination can take a turn to the mathematical ; and then we have a quatrain like the following :

When Bells stop ringing—Church begins—
The Positive—of Bells—
When Cogs—stop—that's Circumference—
The Ultimate—of Wheels.

Or a series of progressive equations as in the following :

The Brain—is wider than the sky
For—put them side by side—
The one the other will contain
With ease—and You—beside—

The Brain is deeper than the sea—
For—hold them—Blue to Blue—
The one the other will absorb—
As Sponges—Buckets—do—

The Brain is just the weight of God—
For—Heft them—Pound for Pound—
And they will differ—if they do—
As Syllable from Sound—

Notice how, within the abstract framework of the poem, there is a counterbalancing movement from thinner to denser reality (wider than the sky—deeper than the sea—just the weight of God). At the same time, God as a term of measurement abolishes measures and weight, so that 'weight' here should be read as 'intensity', due to the momentous modification. And the final relation packs all the tensions of the poem, implying as it does both identity and radical difference : for 'syllable' stands against 'sound' as articulate language against its indefinite source and matter. To say "finite against infinite" would make it all too pat.

Magical Abstraction

One cannot conclude without at least a passing reference to the "degreeless noon" and "decades of arrogance" of the death clock, or to the imagistic prestige of "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" with its mysterious Doges that surrender "soundless as dots on disks of snow"—what *reductio ad absurdum* of human history to puny insignificance in the blank vastity of the universe could be more abstractly magical ?

13

Emily Dickinson's View of Death

Mystery and Fascination of Death

One of Emily Dickinson's unique contributions to American literature is her poetic insight into the nature of death. Closely related to her knowledge of pain and longing for eternal life, this understanding of death was demonstrated in more than five hundred lyrics. The range of her poetic treatment varied from a philosophical examination of death's relation with love to a grim consideration of its physical processes. As she surveyed the broad universe and society itself, Emily perceived that death remained the one free agent, greater than nature and second only to God. She considered death the great unknown and never ceased to ponder its fascination and mystery. If death resulted in despair and terror, it also brought rest and peace and increased one's enjoyment of life. Death came as a wily courtier, stealthily wooing with a counterfeit charm. It commanded one's presence as a king, stung like an insect, maneuvered like a snake, visited as an old friend, ruthlessly killed as a hired assassin—the images are endless, furnishing a complete natural history of death. In fact, Emily Dickinson once wrote a mock biographical sketch of death, "Dust is the only Secret", noting that death was the only one who remained unknown in his home town. In the role of a reporter bewildered by the elusive facts, she remarks that his parents were unknown and that he grew up without playmates. This poem typifies many of her verses that personify death, of which "Because I could not stop for Death" is the finest. She closely examined the sensations of the dying, the response of the onlookers, the terrible struggle of the body for life, the adjustments in a house after death, the arranging of the body for the funeral, the church services, and even the thoughts of the dead person. In her best poems she minimized death's sensational and emotional aspects to plumb its ultimate relation with love and immortality and to sound the reaches of its frightening power.

Sensations of the Dying Person

Some of her best lyrics on death considered the sensations of the dying person, the physical experiences as the soul leaves the body. In all these poems tension is established by contrasting the inertness of the dead person with the movement of the living and the external growth of nature. "I heard a fly buzz—when I died" contrasts the expectations of death with its realistic occurrence. The traditional Christian belief that leads to eternal happiness is undercut by the appearance of an insignificant, distracting fly. The final acts of the dying person are presented with a crisp detachment. In its careful preparation for Death's entrance, the soul rigidly controls the final moments. The pun in "Signed" and "Assignable" ironically illustrates death's supreme power, for only worthless documents, empty phrases, curious mementos, and a corrupting body can be left behind. The irony increases as the soul precisely arranges everything and waits confidently for death. Now the grand moment is at hand, but unfortunately a fly interrupts the ceremony.

Like so much of life's experience the fly comes at the wrong time, as a petty irritant which distracts from the magnificent approach of death. What the dying person fails to realize is that the fly signalizes death's presence. Its stumbling blue buzz, an apt synaesthetic image that conveys the confusion of the dying mind, imitates the pattern of life, where moments of beauty and confidence are juxtaposed with ugliness and uncertainty. The fly comes between the light and the dying person, not just blocking physical sight but obscuring the radiance of immortality as well. The final line captures the desperate intensity of the person's struggle for life. Instead of the calm assurance of the earlier stanzas, the person now fails to recognize death's arrival and fights to prevent subjection. Pathetically the person claims that the windows fail, not his eyesight. "I could not see to see" is the last effort at self-control. In these few seconds the soul says that it could not will its eyes open for a final view. One of the deepest ironies here is the soul's confidence that it still controls the body. Only the reader knows the hopelessness of these attempts and how aptly the fly symbolizes life and death, since its buzz is associated with daily household activities, while its food often consists of carrion. The whole poem satirizes the traditional view of death as a peaceful release from life's pressures and a glorious entrance into immortality. Emily Dickinson sees only disappointment, a buzzing fly, and the terrible attempts of a soul to prolong life.

Death's Dreadful Isolation

A more disturbing portrayal of death is "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain." With its detailed presentation of a complete funeral as felt through the ebbing sensations of a dead person, this poem borders on the morbid in portraying the terrible struggle that the separation of the body from the soul occasions. Here is no hope of immortality, only a despairing plunge into an eternal abyss. Still, as many critics have noted, the funeral service is not merely exploited for sensational effects, but it has an allegorical significance. The physical death symbolizes spiritual decease and perhaps a momentary insight into the nature of infinity. The emphasis on dying sensations and failing powers suggests death's dreadful isolation. On another level the initial phrase "in my Brain" hints that this physical death represents some terrible emotional pain or loss that brings an overwhelming sense of despair. Since the soul has lost its reason for living the person ceases to exist. In an original interpretation of the poem, George Monteiro holds that it deals with the direct knowledge of the absolute when the soul gains a temporary insight into the infinite. Death symbolizes this, since it is one of the few crucial experiences that reveals a glimpse of final things. Monteiro concludes that the poem combines both triumph and failure, for man must return to reality after breaking through the barriers of sense into infinity.

Effect of Death on Dying Person

In another themal grouping, the poet allows a detached observer to view death and analyze its effects upon the dying person. "I've seen a Dying Eye" captures the feverish intensity of a dying person's search for a "Something", which is found without ever being disclosed to the intent onlooker. Thus death continues to baffle all human efforts to comprehend its meaning. Another poem, "How many times these low feet staggered", explores the terrible physical transformation caused by death. Only images of iron and stone recall this once vital soul. Yet, in the final stanza death brings a release from pain and guilt and frees one from the monotonous toil of sewing and dusting. This poem achieves a subtle characterization of the dead woman, gaining our sympathy while baffling our understanding. One of the best poems in this group is "The last Night that She lived". Unlike its presentation in "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died", death is here envisioned as a graceful departure into the sublime waters of immortality. Pain and loss recede as the dead woman obtains eternal peace. The opening stanzas quietly contrast the movement of the onlookers with the tranquillity of death's presence. Death's piercing light illuminates important things, besides radiating grace and salvation. The middle stanzas present the mixed responses of the dead woman's friends. They are grieved that she must die while other less worthy still alive ; yet they resent her escape into infinity when they must endure more of life's pain. The next stanzas describe her death with the beautiful image of a slender, fragile reed gently bent by the winds. The reed shudders momentarily as it touches the cold waters of eternity, then, as if in glad response, consents to go with death. The final stanza conveys the depression following death as the living busy themselves with funeral arrangements and wait to face the endless pain of time's separation. Even the hope that their religious belief will control this pain is tinged with irony, for emotions cannot be so confidently ordered. The finality of death leaves one helpless and even shakes faith's consolation.

The Soul's Exit : Terrible Emptiness

Some of Emily Dickinson's "observer" poems on death emphasize its physical aspects to illustrate the terrible emptiness occasioned by the soul's departure. In "Too cold is this" she portrays death's complete dominion over life with chilling detachment.

Too cold is this
To warm with Sun—
Too stiff to bended be,

. . . .

How went the Agile Kernel out
Contusion of the Husk
Nor Rip, nor wrinkle indicate
But just an Asterisk.

Images of coldness and stone contrast the body's former vitality with its present immobility. As a slab of polished marble that merely glistens in the sun, the body is so inflexible that even the finest craftsman could not "joint" its pieces. Unlike the God of the Old Testament whom Ezekiel described resurrecting the dry bones in the valley, this master mason cannot revitalize this inert, blankly staring mass. The second stanza considers how the life principle was extinguished, contrasting nature's cycle of death and rebirth with man's departure into the infinite unknown. The mystery of the soul's exit is heightened, since the usual signs attendant upon such a loss are missing. There is no contusion or rip, only a blank asterisk, the typed symbol placed beside a person's name to indicate his death. The impersonality and callousness of the image manifest the desolation of the body once the soul has fled.

The Despairing Reality of Physical Death

A fuller examination of death that deepens its philosophical and religious implications is "A Clock stopped". Using the superstition of a clock stopping when a person dies and the age-old comparison of life to a timepiece, she portrays death as the sudden breakdown of a carefully constructed Swiss clock. At noon its intricately carved figurine bows to announce the hour and then remains there dangling as the long pendulum below is stilled. The shift from movement to immobility comes with frightening haste as death plunges this clock mechanism into a soundless, snowy isolation. The grim comparison of man to a mechanical device emphasizes his meaninglessness. Instead of a glorious immortality the soul is faced with a fearful strangeness once it leaves the body. The faint suggestion of immortality in "Degreeless Noon" and the arrogance of the "Him" (the soul) after leaving the body offer slim consolation, a most qualified view of resurrection that runs counter to orthodox belief. The structure of the poem balances the first two stanzas, which deal with the physical aspects of the body at death, against the last two stanzas, which consider the futile efforts of the doctor and the new arrogance of the soul now freed from its trinket body.

A Clock stopped—
Not the Mantel's—
Geneva's farthest skill
Can't put the puppet bowing—
That just now dangled still—

An awe came on the Trinket !
The Figures hunched, with pain—
Then quivered out of Decimals—
Into Degreeless Noon—

The halving of the first line emphasizes that this cessation signifies more than the mere breakdown of a mantel clock. The Swiss clock metaphor controls the whole poem. Geneva was, of course, a centre for the watchmaking industry and also the residence of John Calvin, a great designer of Protestantism's complex philosophy. But even this master craftsman cannot repair the unwound springs and broken gears of this clock life. The image of the bowing figurine, suspended in a parody of human courtesy, suggests man's robot life, which is rigidly controlled by a puppet master. Ironically, even his power is ineffective. In the second stanza "awe" hardly fits a cheap trinket, and this incongruity mocks the hope that the figure might have envisioned God before its death. The next lines focus on the moment of death, the dying throes of the puppet. The pun in "Figures" is related to the whole clock concept and expanded in "quivered out of Decimals." No more seconds can be counted off, for the hands of the clock are superimposed on noon. Though hardly a comforting metaphor for immortality, "Degreeless Noon" represents the timelessness of eternity, the moment when the clock completes its cycle and the sun is brightest. Death brings little glory and less assurance.

The Shopman importunes it—
While cool—concernless No—

Nods from the Gilded pointers—
Nods from the Seconds slim—
Decades of Arrogance between
The Dial life—
And Him—

The next two stanzas shift to the harried efforts of the designer-doctor to restore life. His failure blasphemously hints at limitations in God's power. He can create, but indifference and cold arrogance mock his pitiful efforts at restoration. The life force itself ("Pendulum") is frozen and white and suggests negation and despair with its repeated "No". Still, a touch of solemnity enters as death bestows new dignity. The entrance into eternity puts decades of difference between meaningless "Dial life", a physical existence guided by Calvinism's legal-religious sanctions, and the new existence in eternity. The poem concludes as it began, with a halved line, emphasizing the personal pronoun "Him". This cannot refer to the neuter trinket corpse or to the shopman who still resides in a temporal dial life, but only to the soul that leaves once the body dies. Thus the previous hints of immortality in "awe" and "Degreeless Noon" receive full expansion. The whole poem subtly blends the despairing reality of physical death and the frightening limitations of temporal life with the mystery of eternity. Though death ends physical life, it does not cause complete loss, but only a change and separation that baffle the onlookers. The bitter tone is mitigated by the suggestion of the soul's existence after death. The poem might be read as a satire of Calvinism's precise and logical philosophy, which codifies man's life only to break down when faced with the reality of death, and in this sense it is reminiscent of Oliver Wendell Holmes' "The Deacon's Masterpiece", with its witty satire of the disintegration of Calvinism's "one-hoss shay."

Elegies on Man's Frail Mortality

Emily Dickinson's numerous elegies form a coda to her examination of death. Especially in her later years elegies constituted many of her poems. An earlier one, "More Life—went out—when He went," eulogizes the vital personality and spiritual force that made this man so superior to other common lives and so difficult for death to subdue. Also, her quatrains on her nephew Gilbert's death capture the innocence of his young soul. Appropriately, her finest elegy was written about her father. For years after his death she continued to mourn his loss and refer to him in letters. In 1877 she wrote to Higginson : "Since my Father's dying, everything sacred enlarged so—it was dim to own" and goes on speaking about the church's view of immortality. Suddenly she asks if Higginson had any doubts himself, remarks that she had been rereading his poem "Decoration", and gives her poem :

> Lay this Laurel on the One
> Too intrinsic for Renown—
> Laurel—veil your deathless tree—
> Him you chasten...

The poem directly addresses the mourner to lay his laurel, the traditional symbol of victory and an evergreen plant associated with the metamorphosis of forms, on the "One". The capitalization underscores his distinct individuality. The second line expands this by saying that the inner values that made him superior were too much a part of his very essence to obtain external renown. His virtues were even more singular, since they were not displayed for others to see. The tone shifts in the next two lines as the poet commands the laurel to veil its conventional sign ("deathless tree"), since no external symbol can capture the greatness of this man. In one sense such a display would "chasten" or punish the man, for he would never attach any significance to the tribute. Another reading for the line, using "chasten" as "subdued" or "conquered", might be that, despite his great qualities, he is but a mortal man. So the poet asks nature to mourn for his death by temporarily covering its laurel, whose deathless evergreen mocks man's frail mortality. One further reading, using "chasten" as "refining" or "purifying", enlarges the concept of superiority in "One" to indicate that he has not been destroyed, only changed to something finer. Since his soul lives in paradise, nature's deathless quality has been transcended.

Death—The Supreme Adversary

The profound implications in this small lyric show Emily Dickinson's skill in enriching her considerations of death with philosophical overtones and in deepening conventional themes with original insights. Few American poets analyzed death with such variety and intensity. True to her own soul, she never flinched from death's harsh reality nor ever ceased considering the various ways she might face this supreme adversary. Significantly, one of her last poems is entitled "So give me back to Death."

14

Emily Dickinson's Concept of Immortality

> The Only News I know
> Is Bulletins all Day
> From Immortality.

Meaning of Immortality

Immortality's unknown expanse excited Emily Dickinson's inquiring mind, while her perplexity with its mystery became a strategy for achieving poetic tension. Almost any aspect of doubt and belief can be found in her writings on immortality ; she desired personal immortality and asserted that the soul never changed ; yet, she denied the orthodox vision of paradise and even feared that eternity would be cosmic annihilation. Still, throughout her writings certain basic motifs appear. While she felt that the very intensity and significance of human existence forecast its continuance after death, she continually wondered if paradise could ever surpass earthly beauty or human love. Her confidence that love endured beyond the grave bulwarked her hopes for immortality. Her poems associate love, eternity, beauty, God, and even circumference with immortality. Though never certain that death was the threshold of immortality, she firmly believed that the soul's identity could not be lost.

Haunting Reality of the Immortality's Vision

Her fascination with immortality found its most imaginative expression in the poems dealing with circumference, the earthly vision of immortality's haunting reality. In "I taste a liquor never brewed" a drinking conceit describes the ecstasy that accompanies a revelation. The exaggerated phrases convey the divine exhilaration of this insight. A more finished philosophic statement of this vision, "The Soul's Superior instants," employs images of regality and elusiveness to describe the moment. Original metaphors capture the paradoxical theme : that the most significant experience in life remains the most intangible and fleeting. The poem concludes that only a few ever perceive the vision of immortality. Her most searching examination of the unusual effects of grace upon the human soul is "The farthest Thunder that I heard." The principal metaphor that describes an electric storm clearing the air on a hot, humid day suggests the spiritual explosion that occurs when divine grace comes. As a visible sign of a sacramental experience, this bolt of lightning eternally marks her soul.

> Indebtedness to Oxygen
> The Happy may repay,
> But not the obligation
> To Electricity—
> It founds the Homes and decks the Days
> And every clamour bright
> Is but the gleam concomitant
> Of that waylaying Light—

Since Oxygen is a basic element in supporting human life, the dependent living can acknowledge their debt to it. However, this "Electricity" is a hidden, mysterious force that baffles understanding and demands humble acceptance. It forms the basis for spiritual growth and adorns life with beauty and faith.

Life : The Term Between Eternity and Immortality

Her finest poem on the philosophic implications of this vision, one that relates immortality and death, is "Behind Me—dips Eternity." The poem focuses on the moment of death as the soul hovers between chaos and eternity. The apocalyptic theme is presented with solemnity and grandeur, soaring and expanding to the farthest reaches of the poetic imagination. Unlike some of her other lyric expressions, this poem is ordered by a consistent philosophic view and a carefully wrought structure. It views human existence as a brief term, surrounded by the expanse of God, and pictures the soul as pre-existing in eternity and returning there after death. However, the religious conviction is qualified by the fear that it may not be true. Controlled by a light-dark metaphor, the poem has a threefold structure. It moves from the present confidence of a soul standing at the threshold of eternity to a vision of paradise, with its perfect bliss in the second stanza, until the third stanza suggests the underlying doubt and terror of the moment. The basic images contrast the light of the dawn and the moon against the darkness of death and despair, and an insistent repetition of key words, a heavily accentuated rhetorical pattern, and a striking alliteration of "d", "m", and "b", sounds convey the solemnity of the experience.

> Behind Me—dips Eternity—
> Before Me—Immortality—
> Myself—The Term between—
> Death but the Drift of Eastern Gray,
> Dissolving into Dawn away,
> Before the West begin—

The first stanza opens with the soul facing east in total isolation. Behind her is the setting sun and twilight ; but, just as the sun only seems to disappear before man's limited sight, so the divine presence ("Eternity") remains even in death. Before her is the hope of dawn

("Immortality"), an assuring proof of a new life. As Anderson notes: "Her gaze is for the moment so fixed on these two radiant zones she has no words for the mortal existence she actually knows." So she calls life a "Term", something short and limited, which suggests a term of prison confinement. Death itself is only a passing gray cloud that dissolves before the dawn of Immortality.

'Tis Kingdoms—afterward—they say—
In perfect—pauseless Monarchy—
Whose Prince—is Son of None—
Himself—His Dateless Dynasty—
Himself—Himself diversify—
In Duplicate divine—

Immortality : A Miracle

The vision is introduced with a qualified "they say", as if she has to strengthen her belief by quoting the proper authorities. Though the soul feels this sense of the Divine, it cannot be certain, and the doubt suggested here is to be expanded in the last stanza. However, the view of heaven's prince is awesome and filled with traditional reverence for the mystery of the Godhead. The hushed mood captures the splendour and perfect peace of immortality. Though Christ is surprisingly called the "Son of None" instead of the "Son of Man", the title aptly suggests Christ's lack of a human father and his timeless existence. The triple "Himself" hints at the mystery of the Trinity, while God's re-creation of himself in "Duplicate Divine" echoes the statement in Genesis about man's being made in God's image and likeness.

. . . .

A Crescent in the Sea—
With Midnight to the North of Her—
And Midnight to the South of Her—
And Maelstrom—in the Sky—

As a perfect coda, the third stanza repeats the initial pattern, admitting that immortality is a miracle, unexplainable by reason or science. Life now appears as a crescent, a slender moon which rises out of the raging black waters. As a mere reflection the moon is utterly dependent on the sun's light, and this image parallels the "Duplicate Divine" concept, while also indicating the world of flux and change in which man exists. The final lines present the alternative to this faith in immortality—the terror of midnight and the destructive power of a maelstrom. So the poem ends with the evocative image of the fragile moon just evading annihilation. The slender thread of faith is stretched to near breaking but the triumphant vision of the "perfect—pauseless Monarchy." seems secure at last.

Quest for Belief in Immortality

Emily Dickinson's most typical approach to the problem of immortality is seen in "This World is not Conclusion." After a definite assertion of belief, the poem explores the perplexing inability of philosophers, scholars, and saints to prove adequately the truth of immortality.

This World is not Conclusion
A Species stands beyond—
Invisible, as Music—
But positive, as Sound—

Even the opening lines are double-edged. After the firm statement of faith her position is qualified by the indefinite term "Species". Her comparison of immortality with music increases the doubt, for invisible and intangible sounds are hardly positive proof. The middle lines follow this pragmatic approach as she finds the testimony of philosophers and martyrs unconvincing. As if writing an autobiography, she remarks :

Faith slips—and laughs, and rallies—
Blushes, if any see—
Plucks at a twig of Evidence—
And asks a Vane, the way—

Faith, as if a bit intoxicated, wavers in her attempts to follow the righteous paths of the saints. Slipping and falling, she clutches at weak twigs for support and then helplessly asks a weather vane for directions. The final lines satirize the empty gestures and "Strong Hallelujahs," that orthodox religion substitutes for faith and conclude that such religion is like a narcotic that "cannot still the Tooth/ That nibbles at the soul."

The Assurance of Immortality

"A Solemn thing within the Soul" furnishes another approach to immortality. The traditional image of fruit ripening in the sun reveals the confidence and tranquillity brought by faith. Among Emily Dickinson's examinations of immortality this poem remains unique since it conveys perfect resignation and serene submission to God's will. Two other poems, "Though the great Waters sleep" and "My Cocoon tightens—Colours tease", also delineate the assurance of immortality. The former employs an original fire-water metaphor that reminds one of Robert Frost's meditation on the world's end in "Fire and Ice."

Areas of Immortality's Domain

Emily Dickinson surveyed every area of immortality's domain, examining its relations with death and love, satirizing its solemnity, depicting its terrible isolation, and philosophically probing its effects upon the soul. Her best poems on immortality have another New England trait, a philosophic toughness. "Two Lengths has every Day" logically argues that the identity of the soul cannot be lost in immortality :

Two Lengths has every Day—
It's absolute extent
And Area superior
By Hope or Horror lent—

Eternity will be
Velocity or Pause
At Fundamental Signals
From Fundamental Laws.

. . . .

The poem examines a common psychological experience, that the soul not only realistically perceives an object but imaginatively creates its full impression. So each day has two lengths, an absolute one of twenty-four hours, which can be accurately measured, and an "Area superior", which depends upon a soul's mood. Arguing from this basic truth, Emily Dickinson says that eternity will be similar, either an active, evolving existence ("Velocity") or a static, suspended state ("Pause"). Since the transitory customs of the earth will be eliminated, eternity's new requirements will be based on the essence of man and God. The final stanza asserts that death will not destroy the soul or even change its identity, for man's individual consciousness will guide his journey to immortality.

The Chilling Emptiness of Eternity

Another poem that investigates the mystery of eternity accentuates its strangeness, for terror and alienation replace the assurance of "Two Lengths has every Day." This poem examines the perplexity of a soul accustomed to time-space limitations in adjusting to the new dimensions of infinity.

Great Streets of silence led away
To Neighbourhoods of Pause—
Here was no Notice—no Dissent
No Universe—no Laws—

By Clocks, 'twas Morning, and for Night
The Bells at Distance...
But Epoch had no basis here
For Period exhaled.

The introductory image shows how frightening and oppressive familiar streets and neighbourhoods become when human activity and sound are removed. Then follows a closer examination of how completely infinity severs all the connecting links with humanity. Eternity has "no Notice", no signs or guides to indicate where one is or where one should go. Nor is any "Dissent" possible here, since God's absolute rule will allow man neither volition nor individuality. Then "no Universe" can be seen, for infinity has no accustomed landmarks, only blankness. Finally, there are "no Laws", since the usual rules that govern normal society will be suspended. These clipped negations suggest the chilling emptiness that a loss of these familiar things occasions.

In the second stanza the strangeness assumes nightmarish proportions as temporal time is completely confused. Clocks indicate morning, while distant bells toll out an evening curfew. After the pause and silence of the first stanza, the reappearance of time and sound should be reassuring, but this discord only increases the fear. The poem stresses the transformation that eternity demands, the adaptation of one's earthly consciousness to a new perspective. At first this appears impossible, but the final lines offer a glimmer of hope. The soul must realize that its former gauges of time and history ("Epoch") have no pertinence here. Yet the final personification, that of time slowly exhaling to wipe out forever dates and facts ("Period") leaves an appalling vacuum. The poem shows the bewilderment of a soul newly entering paradise and the fear that lies at immortality's core.

The Eternal Cycle

Appropriately, the last poem in this section, "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers", stands as one of Emily Dickinson's finest lyrics on the ambiguous relation of death and immortality. Neither the terror of death nor the assurance of immortality are presented here, only a sense of the sublimity and isolation that death imposes. The poem examines various attitudes on death and immortality: first, the consolations of faith and hope in resurrection ; then the loss of animation and physical vigour ; and finally, the fearful grandeur of the soul's new immortal existence. The key images contrast nature's vitality with the enclosed, alabaster condition of the dead and the slow, stately movement of eternity. The poem moves from the linear, closed images of the tomb into circular, expanding ones of crescents, scoops, and arcs, away from temporal limitations to the grandeur of years and worlds and finally into the firmament itself. The vastness of this eternal cycle dwarfs all other considerations and reveals the insignificance of the waiting meek followers and the childishness of nature's babbling. Eternity disdains temporal time and material existence. The final lines show death's levelling power and portray man's absorption into eternity as the insignificant dropping of a dot on a disc of snow. There is little religious consolation and no acknowledgement of personal immortality, for in death man mingles with nature's white and alien oversoul without personality or sensation. A numbed blankness suggests the superiority, even the majesty, of this ambiguous existence. In her poem on immortality, Emily Dickinson reveals not only her religious depths and perceptive insight into spiritual reality but also her artistic ability in employing both skepticism and faith as a strategy to increase the dramatic tension of her poems. Her final position is best understood by a letter she wrote to Judge Lord near the end of her life : "On subjects of which we know nothing...we both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble."

15

Emily Dickinson's Vision

Cleavage Between Man and His Surroundings

Emily Dickinson's poetry surveys a world that is fraught with perils and profoundly contemptuous of human needs. Much of the poetry is constructed around one or the other of two possible responses to that world. One is an attitude involving submission to tragic realities. The second countenances what might be thought of as a strategic retreat from the circumstances of tragedy. Whatever the response to this tragic world, the fact remains that Nature is actively antagonistic toward the individual. It implies a cleavage, broad and irreconcilable, between the human being and his non-human surroundings. Above all, it points to the animosity of God; for to the extent that Nature reveals God to Emily, she reveals a Creator who harbours toward creation some bitter resentment, whose attitude toward the human race is grounded in a deep and abiding ill-will.

Assumptions of Pattern and Experience of Chaos

Emily Dickinson was endowed with the sort of religious sensibility which can be satisfied with nothing less than absolute certitude. She needed to *know*, in the fullest and profoundest sense of knowing. She could have accepted life as being fit and orderly, provided she possessed the unqualified assurance that God exists, and provided she had full and valid insights into the workings of God's mind. The specific issue which she confronted may be described in some such fashion as this. Emily yearned to assume that, despite any evidence to the contrary, there was an underlying pattern in human experiences, which gave to the experiences both coherence and meaning. The "modest needs" to which she refers in one of her poems were, fundamentally, the needs for conviction: conviction that life was somehow purposive; that suffering and death could be justified; above all, that death itself was no more than the prelude to personal immortality. Experience, unfortunately, declined to accommodate. When Emily Dickinson looked to the actual, tangible world around her, it was to discover that the pattern which she craved was forever dissolving into a ceaseless flow of time and change. When she surveyed life, as life could be known, she found no system and no gradation—and no trace of God in his benevolent majesty. She was greeted instead by whirl and mutability, by the uninterrupted scattering and steady vanishing away of all experiences.

Dangerous Exploit

The problem before Emily Dickinson was : how to live when one could not accept Christ's call ? Even if one renounced a heavenly goal that gave direction to this transitory world, one could not resign one's self to a merely physical existence in a world of death ; one would have to find something which was neither the life of matter nor the life of heaven but partook of both. Where could such a mode of experience be found ? It would be a difficult search and a dangerous exploit, but it was either the quest—with or without a certain goal—or despair.

Man's Lostness

We are lost in life as in death. In one poem the sun and the robin's songs insult the dead and mock those who are dying. In another poem, she gropes for "My Duplicate", someone as forlorn and baffled as she, only to discover that the walls of other men's minds are "Impregnable to inquest." At such times Nature, too, seems "too young to feel, or many years too old", as if it, like God and man, "did not care." Another poem calls Nature a "stranger", a "mystery", an "abyss", a "floorless" sea, a fathomless well. An "Approving God" fixed for Nature an inexorable course in which each "happy Flower" falls victim to chilling frost.

Abiding Alienation

Man's plight could be summed up succinctly : abandonment and death.

> Without a smile—Without a Throe
> A Summer's soft Assemblies go
> To their entrancing end
> Unknown—for all the times we met—
> Estranged, however intimate—
> What a dissembling Friend—

Her phrases— "soft Assemblies", "entrancing", "all the times we met", and "intimate"—suggest the blandishments we undeniably find in our world ; even the autumnal end of things is "entrancing". But "end", "Unknown", and "Estranged" cut through the beguiling surface to disclose an abiding alienation, and the final line dramatically summarizes the whole poem in the concise paradox of a world in which intimacy, however charming, is the fraudulent ruse of a "dissembling Friend."

Power of Blackness

In speaking of our birth as a thrusting of a stranger into a foreign universe, Thoreau wrote that experience showed, as scars disappeared, that in a deeper sense "nature is one and continuous everywhere." Emily Dickinson could not be so sure and though she was not always paralyzed by doubt, she was at times as lonely as Hawthorne's Goodman Brown in the heart's dark forest, as baffled as Melville by the whale's riddling blankness, as numb as Poe's Pym before the apocalyptic white cataract. Some of Thomas Hardy's characters concluded that it would have been better not to have been born, and Emily Dickinson knew what they meant :

'Twere better Charity
To leave me in the Atom's Tomb—
Merry, and Nought, and gay, and numb—
Than this smart Misery.

The spectre of extinction, which was the primal fear, could seem at times the only grace and final deliverance :

Many Things—are fruitless—
'Tis a Baffling Earth—
But there is no Gratitude
Like the Grace—of Death—

No pessimist knew the power of blackness more deeply than Emily Dickinson.

Existence of the Deity

In this quandary, why not turn to God, even if not to Christ and His Church ? Emily Dickinson never doubted the existence of the Deity : "God cannot discontinue himself. This appalling trust is at times all that remains" ; but the furthest extent of her faith was the plea of the good-bad little girl to her incomprehensible parent :

I hope the Father in the skies
Will lift his little girl—
Old fashioned—naughty—everything—
Over the stile of "Pearl".

She could speak even more casually, calling Him "Our Old Neighbour—God" and acting the child too self-consciously to conceal the desperation under her coyness :

Papa above !
Regard a Mouse
O'erpowered by the Cat !
Reserve within thy kingdom
A "Mansion" for the Rat !

She pleaded as a helpless mouse, knowing well that to Him she might seem a "Rat". Her plea was desperate because most of the time the "Old Neighbour" had receded "more than a firmament—from Me—" beyond the moon and stars. In His remote seat He seemed a Father to others but not to her—parentless in heaven as she sometimes seemed on earth. She "prayed at first, a little girl.../ But stopped" at the realization of how small and silly we must look to the Deity, if He sees us at all. In reverse perspective, from the apertures of our mouseholes we can only glimpse a lonesome God in a cold heaven above a world whose machinery grinds out "His Perturbless Plan." Confronted with the question why she did not turn to God, Emily Dickinson would have flashed back : "Of course —I prayed—/ And did God care ?" He is "a God of Flint" ; He is Jove ; He is Jehovah, and the Trinity is the Jehovahs.

God—The Father

Emily Dickinson could not readily alleviate the torment, as some others did, by shedding the God of the Old Testament and Calvinist Christianity—this last remnant of the old faith—and establishing a new God. She felt the power of Jehovah too forcefully to evade the fact of His supremacy, no matter how awesome a fact it might be ; nor could she doubt Jehovah's fatherhood, however inexplicable that might be. Much of her difficulty with both the old religion and the new is epitomized in the fact that she cried out, as neither Calvinists nor Unitarians nor Transcendentalists would, to One whom she recognized as "Jupiter my father !" and "Burglar ! Banker—Father !"

The Speechless Mover

God was, in some ineffable way, her Father, and yet she could perceive only a "Vastness" that is "the shadow of the Brain which casts it"—the same shadowy vastness which haunted men as different as Pascal and Melville. Like Ahab before the featureless whale, she flung a question at the mask : "Infinitude—Had'st Thou no Face/ That I might look on Thee ?" Although she had not read *Pierre*, she would have known what Melville meant when he wrote : "All profound things, and emotions of things, are preceded and attended by Silence...Silence is the general consecration of the universe. Silence is the invisible laying on of the Divine Pontiff's hands upon the world...Silence is the only Voice of our God." In the same spirit Emily wrote : "I know that He exists./Somewhere in Silence." It seemed to her that at times "the Silence condescended" to strike her with a baffling reply, but too often He, "like the Dumb", would not "Reveal by sign—a syllable" :

> Silence is all we dread.
> There's Ransom in a Voice—
> But Silence is Infinity.
> Himself have not a face.

The Callous Gamester

Then was the Jehovah, the speechless Mover, not perhaps something more positively sinister and malicious ? Were His ways perhaps not just inscrutable but perverse ? Surely He seemed the strong-armed bully when He

> On Moses—seemed to fasten
> With tantalizing Play
> As Boy—should deal with lesser Boy—
> To prove ability.

Elsewhere He is a ravenous "Mastiff", an "Inquisitor", a swindler of children like herself. These were heinous blasphemies for a New England woman of orthodox upbringing but, with Ahab, she could be "Cynic" enough to ponder God's guilt. His games of hide-and-seek might entertain Him, but suppose that His jokes should torture us to death ?

But--should the play
Prove piercing earnest—
Should the glee—glaze—
In Death's—stiff—stare—

Would not the fun
Look too expensive
Would not the jest—
Have crawled too far !

Papa above would have become the cat that torments the helpless mouse and trapped rat. Was so devastating a vision only man's futile attempt to judge divinity by the formulae of human justice ? Or was it a realistic assessment of the human condition ?

Bible—A Romance and a Myth

Emily Dickinson's comments on specific matters of Christian belief amount to an emphatic NO. Her remarks about Scripture indicate that she was aware—in general terms, if not in argumentative detail—of the questions raised by Darwinism and the Higher Criticism. "The Fiction of 'Santa Claus' ", she remarked, "always reminds me of the reply to my early question of 'Who made the Bible'—'Holy men moved by the Holy Ghost', and though I have now ceased my investigations, the Solution is insufficient." Her remarks fall into a pattern : "Austin told me confidentially 'there is no such person as Elijah' " ; Eden is "a legend—dimly told—/ Eve —and the Anguish—Grandame's story—" ; "Ararat's a Legend— now—/ And no one credits Noah—" ; " 'I have finished', said Paul, 'the faith.' We rejoice that he did not say discarded it." The consistent implication is that the Bible must be considered as a humanly, not a divinely, inspired document, as a "romance" or "myth."

Jesus—The Suffering Man

If the New Testament is myth, then Jesus is not God but man, just as Emerson had heretically proclaimed. For both poets Jesus was the representative man : for Emerson, the man-god ; for Emily, the suffering man, the Man of Sorrows. "When Jesus tells us about his Father," Emily wrote, "we distrust him. When he shows us his Home, we turn away, but when he confides to us that he is 'acquainted with Grief', we listen, for that also is an Acquaintance of our own." She did not know His Father ; pain and disillusionment were their only mutual friends. "The loveliest sermon I ever heard was the disappointment of Jesus in Judas. It was told like a mortal story of intimate young men."

The Devil's Dictionary

From Emily Dickinson's letters and poems we can piece together a kind, of Devil's Dictionary, cataloguing, with what often masquerades as a child's mischievousness, the chief tenets of the creed. For example, the Father and the Son are deftly and outrageously depicted in terms of the Miles Standish-Priscilla-John Alden romance :

God is a distant—stately Lover—
Woos, as He states us—by His Son—
Verily, a Vicarious Courtship—
"Miles", and "Priscilla", were such an One—

But, lest the Soul—like fair "Priscilla"
Choose the Envoy—and spurn the Groom—
Vouches, with hyperbolic archness—
"Miles", and "John Alden" were Synonyme—

Elsewhere the "covenant" which binds the Trinity is worked out as a shrewd business transaction : "God broke his contract to his Lamb/ To qualify the Wind." Providence means that "if it be his will that I become a *bear* and bite my fellow men, it will be for the highest good of this fallen and perishing world." Sin is "a distinguished Precipice/ Others must resist." Man is, absurdly, imprisoned with guilt for an unknown and uncommitted sin. Prayer is vain outcry ; the Sacrament a cause for either terrified flight or uneasy humour which equates Christ and Santa Claus. Predestination, redemption, atonement, grace, sanctification, election—concepts which supposedly explain our destiny and our hope—are all beyond the reach of human ken.

Knowledge—An Illusion

Emily Dickinson knew the force of Emerson's statement of Montaigne's skepticism : "Knowledge is the knowing that we cannot know." She could not be certain when to commit herself to belief and when to pull back. The poems and letters shift from statement to counterstatement to restatement with a restlessness that would allow her only fleeting ease. Rest would come only with certitude, and on her lonely exploration she would never find the miraculous Fleece that would end the quest :

Finding is the first Act
The second, loss,
Third, Expedition for
the "Golden Fleece."

Fourth, no Discovery—
Fifth, no Crew—
Finally, no Golden Fleece—
Jason—sham—too.

Predman Krishen Dhar
M.A. (Pol. Sc. Eco. I. F.

16

Emily Dickinson's Poetic Technique

Her View of Poetry

Emily Dickinson's view of poetry was almost similar to that of Emerson as he defined it in "Merlin" :

> Its chords should ring as blows the breeze
> Free, peremptory, clear.
> No Jingling serenader's art
> . . . .
> The kingly bard
> Must smite the chords rudely and hard,
> As with hammer or with mace;
> That they may render back
> Artful thunder, which conveys
> Secrets of the solar track.

She perfectly exemplifies the poet with special insights who is interested in content, not finished phrasing. For her, originally, poetry must have served as an anodyne for personal feelings, but it soon became the essence of her life. She hardly formulated an explicit poetic theory like Emerson or Poe, but from the comments scattered throughout her letters and poems her views on the obligations of a poet and the nature of poetry can be determined.

Her Poetic Approach

One of her poems, "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant", aptly describes her approach. The emphasis is on truth, on furnishing a complete account of life's experiences to illuminate hidden areas of knowledge and beauty. Since man's understanding is finite, this can be done only by indirection, by the poetic 'slant', which sifts undifferentiated facts to uncover imaginatively truth's gold nuggets. Like Emerson and Poe she felt that the poet was a specially endowed seer who sought to discover "circumference" or the ultimate mysteries. Realistically she saw that such vision was necessarily limited, since "Nature is a Haunted House—but Art—a House that tries to be haunted." Of course, in dealing with truth the poet considered beauty, too, for the two were interchangeable aspects of the Divine nature. However, she never identified nature with the Divine, but contemplated the external world to understand better man's inner soul. She retained the romantic belief that inspiration and emotional response played an essential role in the poetic experience. "If I read a book", she said, "(and) it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way ? Her imaginative and emotional nature delighted more in metaphorical effects and brilliant phrases than in the total organization of the poem.

The Poetic Process

From her own experience she knew the difficulties of the creative act, and in one remarkable poem, "Essential oils—are wrung", compared the poetic process to the extraction of perfume from rose buds. The essence of an experience, the universal insight that the poet tries to express, is not obtained merely by being attuned to nature's processes or by slow organic growth; rather, poetic creation is a difficult task, depending more on the artist than on inspiration. As she imaginatively phrased it, only an unbearable stress could extract the precious essence. The second stanza broadens this concept and affirms the triumph of the artist whose fragrant creation will far outlast the corruptible rose and even the mortal artist.

Fascination with Words

She was fascinated by words and her best poems demonstrate a special awareness of root meanings and employ subtle connotations to deepen implication and association. Her real perplexities in selecting the exact word are attested by the endless variants her work sheets offered for words and phrases. For one phrase that was finally edited as "In eddies of the sun", she listed at least six alternate choices : In fathoms in the sun/ In rapids of the sun/ In gambols with the sun/ In frenzies with the sun/ For frenzy of the sun/ In antics in the sun. Often this fascination with word patterns ends in a failure to perform the final ordering act of creation. Yet, as Anderson has noted, she rejuvenated the trite and hackneyed by various semantic and artistic devices : "Substitution of simple concrete terms for the abstract ones actually intended was her strategy for achieving vivid immediacy, and the opposite for giving transcendent value to the homely. Juxtaposition of words out of different connotative spheres she employed for ironic contrast, as with the legal and amorous, and abrupt changes from one level of discourse to another for rhetorical shock, as from the serious to the comic, from eloquence to bald statement." Reared within a heritage of economy and frugality she ruthlessly cut through syntax and grammar to achieve conciseness. She omitted verbs, skipped conjunctions and prepositions, used dashes instead of conventional punctuation, and employed local pronunciation and dialect phrases to capture the "Attar" of her thoughts. "Capacity to Terminate", she called "A Specific Grace", and like the farmer wresting crops from a begrudging soil she cultivated this virtue. If at times her economy caused the poems to read like shorthand notations, it also gave them an exciting vibrancy.

Original Imagery and Expression

Critics have traced endless influences and analogues for her poems in the Bible, Shakespeare, Blake, Emerson, and others, but she rarely imitated and was seldom derivative. She was not boasting to Higginson when she wrote that she "never consciously touched a paint, mixed by another person." Her vivid imagery and pithy expression drew on personal experiences rather than on classical or literary traditions. Certainly she used the Bible and Shakespeare and other writers for allusions, and she often composed improvisations upon familiar biblical stories. Her vitalization of orthodox religious terms like 'election', 'ecstasy', 'grace', and 'justification' constituted one of her most original achievements. Her love for precise definition (seen in numerous poems with lines beginning with 'Faith is', 'Love is'), her technical vocabulary, which drew widely from fields of medicine, mathematics, and grammar (words like "cauterize", "ratio", "ablative"), and her legal imagery (concentrating on words like "alibi", "enact", "surrogate") gave a pungency and terseness to her verses. Of course, nature furnished a ready source for imagery, though she constantly utilized eccentric subjects like the bat or worm to portray her sense of awe about natural processes and her dissatisfaction with the usual romantic treatment.

The Piquancy and Twang of Familiarity

Also, her own world of household activities and local town events gave her poetry a piquancy and Amherst twang. Her colloquial expressions ("I wish I were a hay"), fondness for local spelling ("boquet", "Febuary"), unique use of the subjunctive voice to create a continuing present tense ("Eclipses be predicated"), and grammatical lapses ("at you and I", "It is Him") have continually outraged meticulous critics and delighted ordinary readers. Few poets could capture the laconic, yet involved, attitude with which a small town observed a funeral as she did in "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House". An idiomatic tone and a few selected details—windows opening "like a pod" and mattresses being flung out—rework familiar household activities to illustrate the terrible separation of death.

Domestic Images

Emily Dickinson had a particular fondness for images dealing with sewing, clothing, housekeeping, the kitchen, and the garden. Often these were adroitly presented, as in her satire of pretentious town women in "What Soft—Cherubic Creatures/ These Gentlewomen are." The central image compares these women to "plush" and "dimity" cloth, using the exact associations of a soft yielding material and a thin, overfine texture to characterize their weak natures and brittle attitudes. Also, she attached special symbolic significance to jewels and royal images, associating them with an elevation to a new aristocratic or "queen" state. A favourite Dickinson device was to contrast a familiar object with something momentous or awe-inspiring in order to shock the reader into a new appreciation or to sound ironic overtones. For example, the simple catalogue of daily actions in "I tie my Hat—I crease my Shawl" is most effective. Here the careful attention paid to meaningless gestures like arranging flowers or creasing a shawl illustrates poignantly how pain can enervate emotional responses.

Capitalizations and Dashes

Emily constantly capitalized nouns, adjectives, verbs, and even adverbs, as if trying to emphasize these words or to give them new dignity. But far more perplexing is her use of dashes, for this device is intimately connected with meaning, musical effects, and over-all tone. This eccentricity often defeats the meaning, for it is difficult to determine when the dashes indicate a metrical pause or when they are to be treated as commas, semicolons, or periods. Again in the holographs the length and slant of the dashes vary so much that a final interpretation is impossible. Certainly in some poems the dashes effectively highlight key phrases and provide a musical notation for reading the verse. Undoubtedly these stylistic devices were meaningful to her and were, perhaps, a definite experiment to loosen the stiff formality of conventional forms. But no matter how the poems are regularized, the final form will be somewhat arbitrary and selective. For example, consider these following two stanzas :

> Some—Work for Immortality—
> The Chiefer part, for Time—
> He—Compensates—immediately—
> The former—Checks—on Fame—
>
> Slow Gold—but Everlasting—
> The Bullion of Today—
> Contrasted with the Currency
> Of Immortality—

The complete poem states that a few select people create for immortality rather than for contemporary fame or immediate success. Throughout, the image of money, the changing currency of time versus the everlasting gold of immortality, emphasizes this idea. Most of the nouns, adjectives and verbs are capitalized, but no real value system can be discerned. The "Some" working for immortality are appropriately capitalized, but so are the time servers ("Chiefer part"), while "former" referring to immortality is left uncapitalized. The capitalization of all the verbs, even the unimportant ones, cannot be explained. The dashes raise even more problems. The pause after "Some" gives effective emphasis, and the one at the end of the line serves as a semicolon or a conjunction. The dash after "Time" is presumably a full stop, while "He" is singled out to break the regular iambic pattern. But it is not clear why the adverb "immediately" is separated from its verb. Perhaps this gives the whole line a definite verse reading. The same approach is repeated in the next line, but with jarring effects, as the disjointed phrases read awkwardly. If one considers the rhythm of the lines, then the dashes can function as caesuras, contributing to the metrical pattern.

Rhyming Devices

Other stylistic traits of Emily Dickinson are seen in this poem. None of the rhymes, neither "Time-Fame" nor "Today-Immortality", are exact. The alternating iambic pattern of six and seven syllables a line is broken twice in the first stanza. Emily Dickinson was not consciously trying to be metrically daring or shocking in her rhyming devices, as were Whitman in his bold experiments with verse and Lanier in his scientific study of sound patterns; rather, she explored older established forms to find a suitable medium for her thoughts. She loosened traditional set meters to capture the easy cadence of conversation and prose, but never attempted *vers libre* nor abandoned rhyming devices. The basic forms used in most of her verses were familiar to her from childhood. Watt's *Christian Psalmody*, which was in her father's library, became her verse primer. Its standard hymnal or ballad meter, four iambic lines, alternating three and four stresses a line with the second and fourth lines rhymed, was her favourite pattern. To avoid monotony she worked endless variations on this basic form, using eight-line stanzas, employing trochaic and other meters to vary the iambic, and letting the metric beat contrast with the meaning stress. Her great prosodic achievement was to enliven the droning monotony of the conventional hymn meter to a degree that its wooden practitioners would have thought impossible.

Her use of rhyme, which seemed so lawless and slovenly to formal critics like Higginson, was actually a liberation of conventional rhyming devices. She abandoned the stiff limitations of exact rhyme, where the final sound and accent were precisely repeated, returning to the much older poetic practice of approximate rhyme, identical and vowel rhyme (as in "move-remove", "see-buy"), imperfect rhyme (same vowel sounds followed by different consonants, as in "thing-in", "us-dust"), and suspended rhyme (different vowel sounds followed by the same consonant sounds, for example, "Star-door", "reach-touch"). These rhymes were selected at will, and she freely varied the pattern within a single poem or stanza. Besides adding a great suppleness to her poetry, these approximate rhymes often capture the jarring discords and painful doubts expressed by the thought. However, this balance of content and form is not always so harmonious. Often the unusual rhymes seem unnecessary; the meter frequently becomes monotonous, while the subject matter remains too intense.

17

Success is Counted Sweetest

(First Published 1878)

I. TEXT

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory

As he defeated—dying—
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear !

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Emily Dickinson's poetry at its most mature continually proclaims that to lose or forego what we desire is somehow to gain. She constantly wrote about the nature of Compensation—that we learn by experience the opposite of what we desire—though she never accepted Emerson's belief in the harmonious correspondence of man and nature. In much the same manner as modern philosophers like Tillich she viewed man as an estranged, beleagured creature who is put under continual stress without any certainty that his pain will merit salvation or that he will even understand the meaning of life. Her short poem *Success is Counted Sweetest* exemplifies this phase of her thought. This poem not only shows Emily's belief in the laws of opposition, that loss enables one to understand victory, but that defeat is superior, since an achieved victory soon loses its value. For Emily Dickinson, desire best defines a thing ; anticipation and search are all. Desire allows the intellect and imagination to comprehend (note she does not say to taste) a nectar, something precious and given only to the gods. By understanding the essence of an object one transcends its temporary physical reality to possess its universal core. "Success" is one of many definition poems usually starting "Experience is", "Renunciation is", "Love is", "Ecstasy is". In them she relentlessly tried to express the meaning of intangible objects and emotional states, to determine their variou properties, and to understand their relation to the human soul Remarks like "Each of us gives or takes heaven in corporeal person for each of us has the skill of life" reveal her unique blending o Calvinism and Transcendentalism. Perhaps she only rationalized losses into gains, but her experimental turn of mind usually perceived different sides to each event. With this double vision she often embraced contradictory positions and moved easily from the physical to the spiritual.

In this poem Emily considers privation and possession, and the modes of enjoyment possible to each. Certainly Emily Dickinson's critics are right in calling this poem an expression of the idea of compensation—of the idea that every evil confers some balancing good, that through bitterness we learn to appreciate the sweet, that "Water is taught by thirst." The defeated and dying soldier of this poem is compensated by a greater awareness of the meaning of victory than the victors themselves can have : he can comprehend the joy of success through its polar contrast to his own despair.

The poem surely does say that ; yet it seems that there is something further implied. On a first reading, we are much impressed with the wretchedness of the dying soldier's lot, and an improved understanding of the nature of victory may seem small compensation for defeat and death ; but the more one ponders this poem the likelier it grows that Emily Dickinson is arguing the superiority of defeat to victory, of frustration to satisfaction, and of anguished comprehension to mere possession. What do the victors have but victory, a victory which they cannot fully savour or clearly define? They have paid for their triumph by a sacrifice of awareness ; a material gain has cost them a spiritual loss. For the dying soldier, the case is reversed : defeat and death are attended by an increase of awareness, and material loss has led to spiritual gain. Emily Dickinson would think that the better bargain.

This poem inverts the sharp wit of Oscar Wilde's "Nothing succeeds like success" and turns it into the paradox of "Nothing succeeds like failure". What it adds to this is the value of the negative quality, not quite the Keatsian "Negative Capability" but a quality of recognition that suggests the availability of making negatives positive in antipodal or antithetical situations. It is a characteristic Dickinson study of contrasts, the more precise nature of which is given in the following lines of the poem :

To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

It is comprehension that is gained, a comprehension of the meaning of success by those who do not have it and by the fact of their not having it. However, it is important to know that the value acquired is not automatically assumed with its lack, but by way of a special kind of attendant awareness of frustration which, in turn, comes from the possession of the positive and powerful emotion of desire. The poem assures us that food, or victory, or any other good thing is best comprehended by the eye of desire from the vantage of privation. We must now ask in what way desire can define things, what comprehension of nectars it can have beyond a sense of inaccessible sweetness.

Since Emily Dickinson was not a philosopher, and never set forth her thought in any orderly way, that question may be answered by a quotation from the seventeenth-century divine Thomas Traherne. Conveniently for us, Traherne is thinking, in this brief meditation, about food—specifically about acorns—as perceived by appetite and by desire.

> The services of things and their excellencies are spiritual : being objects not of the eye, but of the mind : and you more spiritual by how much more you esteem them. Pigs eat acorns, but neither consider the sun that gave them life, nor the influences of the heavens by which they were nourished, nor the very root of the tree from whence they came. This being the work of Angels, who in a wide and clear light see even the sea that gave them moisture : And feed upon that acorn spiritually while they know the ends for which it was created, and feast upon all these as upon a World of Joys within it : while to ignorant swine that eat the shell, it is an empty husk of no taste nor delightful savour.

Emily Dickinson could not have written that, for various reasons, a major reason being that she could not see in Nature any revelations of divine purpose. But like Traherne she discovered that the soul has an infinite hunger, a hunger to possess all things. And like Traherne she distinguished two ways of possessing things, the way of appetite and the way of desire. What Traherne said of the pig she said of her favourite insect :

> Auto da Fe and Judgment—
> Are nothing to the Bee—
> His separation from His Rose—
> To Him—sums Misery—

The creature of appetite (whether insect or human) pursues satisfaction, and strives to possess the object in itself ; it cannot imagine the vaster economy of desire, in which the pain of abstinence is justified by moments of infinite joy, and the object is spiritually possessed, not merely for itself, but more truly as an index of the All. That is how one comprehends a nectar. Emily Dickinson's bee does not comprehend the rose which it plunders, because the truer sweetness of the rose lies beyond the rose, in its relationship to the whole of being ; but she would say that Gerard Manley Hopkins comprehends a bluebell when, having noticed its intrinsic beauties, he adds, "I know the beauty of Our Lord by it". And here is an eight-line poem of her own, in which she comprehends the full sweetness of water.

We thirst at first—'tis Nature's Act—
And later—when we die—
A little Water supplicate—
Of fingers going by—

It intimates the finer want—
Whose adequate supply
Is that Great Water in the West—
Termed Immortality—

Emily Dickinson elected the economy of desire, and called her privation good, rendering it positive by renunciation. And so she came to live in a huge world of delectable distances. Far-off words like "Brazil" or "Circassian" appear continually in her poems as symbols of things distanced by loss or renunciation, yet infinitely prized and yearned-for. So identified in her mind are distance and delight that, when ravished by the sight of a hummingbird in her garden, she calls it "the mail from Tunis." And not only are the objects of her desire distant; they are also very often moving away, their sweetness increasing in proportion to their remoteness. "To disappear enhances", one of the poems begins, and another closes with these lines :

The Mountain—at a given distance—
In Amber—lies—
Approached—the Amber flits—a little—
And That's—the Skies—

To the eye of desire, all things are seen in a profound perspective, either moving or gesturing toward the vanishing-point. Or to use a figure which may be closer to Miss Dickinson's thought, to the eye of desire the world is a centrifuge, in which all things are straining or flying toward the occult circumference. In some such way, Emily Dickinson conceived her world, and it was in a spatial metaphor that she gave her personal definition of Heaven. "Heaven", she said, "is what I cannot reach."

18

A Light Exists in Spring

(First Published 1896)

I. TEXT

A Light exists in Spring
Not present on the Year
At any other period—
When March is scarcely here

A Color stands abroad
On Solitary Fields
That Science cannot overtake
But Human Nature feels.

It waits upon the Lawn,
It shows the furthest Tree
Upon the furthest Slope you know
It almost speaks to you.

Then as Horizons step
Or Noons report away
Without the Formula of sound
It passes and we stay—

A quality of loss
Affecting our Content
As Trade had suddenly encroached
Upon a Sacrament.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Emily Dickinson's affinities with Transcendentalist thought are nowhere more evident than in the bleakest sections of her time poetry. Her attitude toward temporality is credible, because it retains the basic assumptions of Transcendentalism, though it pushes those assumptions to new and radically more pessimistic conclusions. Against the background of Emersonian lore, let us investigate *A Light Exists in Spring*, emphasizing, first of all, the organization of the poem. Into the three opening stanzas, the expectations of an age appear to have been concentrated :

A Light exists in Spring
Not present on the Year
At any other period—
When March is scarcely here

A Color stands abroad
On Solitary Fields
That Science cannot overtake
But Human Nature feels.

It waits upon the Lawn,
It shows the furthest Tree
Upon the furthest slope you know
It almost speaks to you.

Consider the properties of the *Light*. It hovers on the landscape as a unique Natural phenomenon, and, apparently, as one swollen with significance. It is not subject to rational analysis, for *Science* cannot overtake it ; but it does appeal to the intuition, so that *Human Nature* feels it to be important. Finally, it clarifies the speaker's immediate surroundings, bringing into bold relief *the furthest Tree/ Upon the furthest slope you know ;* and it seems to promise a still greater enlargement of the understanding, since *It almost speaks to you*. In each of its roles, therefore, the light is typically—indeed, almost classically—Emersonian : it is an aspect of nature that knows, and that seems anxious to communicate its information to the human being. Another moment, the text seems to suggest, another slight increase in this growing radiation, and the poet's mind will be completely enlightened. Her horizons will be so greatly extended that everything now remaining dark and inscrutable in the cosmos will suddenly become plain. Reading these twelve lines, we sense that the speaker stands on the verge of the same sort of mystical experience which Emerson describes in *Nature*. Or we are reminded of Whitman's assertion that "truths wait in all things", from whence they are forever ready to be plucked forth by the human observer.

With the coming of the next new moment, however, the Emersonian situation, as we are accustomed to think of it, abruptly disintegrates :

Then as Horizons step
Or Noons report away
Without the Formula of Sound
It passes and we stay—

A quality of loss
Affecting our Content
As Trade had suddenly encroached
Upon a Sacrament.

The light recedes ; and whatever truth it might have imparted when it almost spoke, the message is lost now, overtaken by temporality and borne silently off into the darkness, which is at once that of the landscape and of the dark confusions within. Time-future has got, after all, brought the poet nearer to the Ultimate ; the future, instead, has acted as a divisive force, pushing off a promised revelation when the disclosure and all it signified seemed scarcely outside the poet's grasp. The contrast of the sixteenth line makes her plight unbearably poignant. The light *passes*, carried away by exacerbating temporal processes. But *we stay*. As bewildered human beings, we have been robbed by time of an opportunity to gain increased comprehension, and we have no choice except to be deprived and to endure the deprivation.

One may feel that *A Light exists in Spring* involves a cruel inversion of the traditional mystical experience. Certainly, the structure of the poem implies this, beginning as it does on the very brink of insight, only to lapse backward into the dark night of the soul. It seems, though, that a still more fruitful approach to the poem lies through a comparable episode that is presented in *Moby Dick*. The episode occurs when the *Pequod*, its voyage just under way, encounters a sister ship called the *Albatross*. As white and bulky as the white whale himself, the *Albatross* appears to possess secret knowledge of Moby Dick ; swinging in close to the *Pequod*, she seems eager to relate all she knows. But then, at the last moment, Time and Nature conspire to drive her off again. Without breaking silence, she drifts away, leaving unfulfilled the implication that, had her captain been permitted to speak, Ahab's quest for understanding of the white whale would quickly have been successful.

Like Melville in this passage, Emily Dickinson writes *A Light exists in Spring* out of premises which are impeccably Emersonian, but which nonetheless move off in a tragic direction. She commences with the notion that Nature can and will communicate. Then she proceeds to demonstrate that, after a fashion, Natural phenomena *do* communicate, *do* make symbolic gestures—but that, far from resolving the mysteries of experience, the communication only serves to confuse the poet and leave her more baffled than before. From first to last, Emily Dickinson never departs from the Emersonian mythos. It is simply that, by the end of the poem, she has shown that the personified forces in Nature can be detriments as well as benefits, and can act to tantalize and frustrate the human personality as well as to sustain it.

The real problem of the momentous transition lies in the metaphysical uncertainties which time and change are constantly occasioning. The combination of bafflement and despair that permeates the writing does not spring exclusively from the poet's vision of the changing world as an observable fact, a series of strictly natural phenomena. It derives, mainly, from the way in which this shifting, changing world seems intent on harassing the poet, on blocking her off from understanding, on separating her from any fixed point outside its own mobility. In the poem under consideration, phrase upon important phrase indicates the philosophical drift of the poetry—and suggests that just as the particular movement is [illegible] to symbolize movement-in-general, so movement-in-general becomes a horrifying spectacle by epitomizing for the poet everything that is ambiguous and unaccountable in the universe which confronts her.

Note, to begin with, the circumstances recounted in the poem. Here, as the last word implies, a change on the landscape must be associated with the speaker's loss of spiritual fulfilment. When the light goes out, the speaker is deprived of a *Sacrament*—is robbed, in other words, of the joy which might have come through some sort of spiritual communion. Not only are time and change seen as being directly responsible for her loss ; in the conduct of these two forces, we are made to feel them as deliberately malevolent, as treacherous forces which express, through their every action, a profound contempt for the human observer's needs. The verb *encroach* shows this. Implying trespass or infringement, it points up the extent to which temporal experiences gladly, and even eagerly, impose themselves between the speaker and her quest for communion. When the light is taken away without the *Formula* (that is, without the remedy or the alleviation) of *Sound*, this fact emphasizes, in another way, the cruelties of experience. It draws attention to the intense mystery of time's behaviour, and so begets in the speaker a sense of something unfathomably strange in what has happened to her and to her landscape. Taken together, then, the ideas of an *encroachment* and of *silence* get exactly at the attitude toward time which Emily Dickinson will regularly develop. They describe a power which first robs the human observer of contentment, then goes on to compound the injury by providing her with no clues through which the deprivation might be understood.

For Emily Dickinson, spring was a favoured season, since it displayed the wonder of rebirth and openly promised the warm beauty of summer. She called spring a time sent directly from God and particularly welcomed March as the herald of spring. Since, however, the inexorable seasonal change forbids permanent growth or lasting beauty, spring's hope deceives and brings pensiveness. *A Light exists in Spring* is perhaps her best analysis of the peculiar awe that this season inspires. The poem deals with March, the pivot of the new year, when spring transforms the cold, barren winter. Spring's hope is compared to a rarely glimpsed light which carries regal and religious associations to signify the psychological insights that occur at such a moment. Coming as influx of grace, this illumination heightens man's emotional awareness of spring's mysteries and enlarges his poignant sense of estrangement. The "light" image of the first stanza, with its suggestions of purity and freshness, is enriched by these lines :

> A Color stands abroad
> On Solitary Fields
> That Science cannot overtake

Here the Colour, unlike the molten gold of summer or the mellow red of autumn, remains indefinite, standing regally aloof. The quality of this experience is neither rational nor pragmatic ; even science fails to comprehend it. The middle stanzas examine the light's mystical aspect, which reaches "upon the furthest Slope" known to man, into the depths of the human soul. A military conceit changes this solemn tone by describing the light's disappearance with humorous precision. In the final stanza the poet states the significance of the experience, emphasizing its religious value and the desolation that follows its departure. The return of reality, harshly phrased as "Trade", typifies the proceedings of a large impersonal company interested only in measurable gain and unconcerned about religious intangibles. The moment's sacramental aspects, displaying God's grace and power, are now lost. Throughout the poem, motion and light images are constantly interwoven to suggest the longing and awe that the light brings. Thus the physical experience of an early spring day is transformed into a moment of religious illumination.

19

There's A Certain Slant of Light

(First Published 1890)

I. TEXT

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons—
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes—

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us—
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are—

None may teach it—Any—
'Tis the Seal Despair—
An Imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air—

When it comes, the Landscape listens—
Shadows—hold their breath—
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death—

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The *Weltanschauung* which Emily Dickinson inherited may be loosely described as Transcendentalist or, better yet, as Emersonian. But she inverted many of the Emersonian principles. Where the Emersonian held Nature to be deliberately benevolent, Emily agrees that Natural processes are indeed deliberate—but deliberately treacherous and unpredictable. In her poetry, Nature is capable of conferring moments of great ecstasy. But the moments prove fleeting and transitory. They tantalize the observer, lull her into feelings of false security. Suddenly they pass, to be followed by periods when Nature glares back with a chilling hostility. With the Emersonian contention that Nature is rich with symbolic significance, Emily Dickinson again concurs : she never doubts for one moment that all Natural phenomena are intensely meaningful. The difference is that, for her, the meanings are ambiguous at best, and at their worst they become openly terrifying. As her poetry records them, the symbolic gestures in Nature suggest that Nature is actively antagonistic toward the individual. They imply a cleavage, broad and irreconcilable, between the human being and his non-human surroundings. Above all, they point to the animosity of God ; for to the extent that Nature reveals God to Dickinson, she reveals a Creator who harbours toward creation some bitter resentment, whose attitude toward the human race is grounded in a deep and abiding ill-will.

These views recur everywhere in Emily Dickinson's poetry. They are, indeed, the substance of her tragic vision, the prime sources of the grimness and the terror in her writing. At the moment, however, it is enough to see that they are perfectly exemplified in "There's a Certain Slant of Light."

Certainly, there is no trace of Transcendentalist optimism here. The situation is one in which the speaker, contemplating the dying day and the death-like season, is reminded by both of her own ultimate extinction. At first glance one will be tempted to assert that a theme this bleak can scarcely be thought of as Emersonian in any respect. Nevertheless, a tendency central to Emersonianism has been perpetuated. In Emerson's scheme, it is obviously quite impossible ever to conceive of Nature as merely a clod of matter. Given the Emersonian outlook, Natural phenomena will inevitably have to be endowed with an anthropomorphic status, will have to be provided with intelligences and personalities distinctly their own. This is precisely the conception which Emily Dickinson has retained. Seeing Nature in a way that Emerson never would—as the source of pain rather than pleasure, as the bearer of bad news rather than of benevolent tidings—Dickinson still manages to stay well within the Transcendentalist tradition. Like Emerson, she declines to treat her subject as a "thing", but she imputes to the Natural environment the motives, the impulses, and the temperamental qualities of a human (or, really, a superhuman) being.

For in the poem, Nature acts, while the human observer is acted upon. Syntax, symbolism, and description all conspire to suggest that the actions of the non-human must be interpreted as parts of a deliberate plot against the human observer. Thus the light *gives* her an injury, and the air has *sent* her the *Seal Despair*. Furthermore, both light and air are portrayed as symbolic of God, so that they become agents through whom God imposes His *Heavenly Hurt* upon the speaker, or maims her with His *imperial affliction*. Finally, air and light remain aloof and mysterious because they seem to wish to elude the human mind. *None may teach (them)—Any* (that is, no human being can hope to master them intellectually), for the simple reason that these Natural forces do not permit themselves to be understood. The non-human, in brief, has been made to possess human desires, human cunning. As Nature (and by symbolic extension, God) bring their great weight of pain to bear on the speaker, they are shown to have injured and oppressed with a [illegible] ill.

After an intellectual analysis of the poem, let us try to understand its meaning. The poem is unquestionably beautiful in its sound, and striking in its imagery, yet resists definition in terms of a logical, comprehensive statement. This poem, certainly, is one of those rare poems which are experienced, never completely understood. It seems to me impossible to read the lines without feeling a tragic, serene emotion which must be akin to the melancholy about which Keats writes.

In regard to the poem's meaning, the reader finds himself perplexed at first. The poet experiences a profound affliction in the presence of something normally regarded as cheerful—a ray of light. If, however, one remembers the mystical approach which characterizes much of Emily Dickinson's writing, the poem assumes a new meaning. This is not a mystical poem, but it derives its ethereal quality from the influence of the mystical aspect of Emily Dickinson's view-point. Light, itself a characteristic mystical symbol of the Divine, and perhaps also the natural splendour of the world which the light reveals and enhances in the afternoon, fading glow, strikes Emily Dickinson with the irresistible force of an Eternal Power. Not mere speculation is stimulated ; an emotional ecstasy of such intensity that it is an affliction possesses her. Furthermore, it is an *imperial* affliction sent us of the air. It is again the mystical concept of the worthiness of painful ecstasy to promote the complete fulfilment of one's nature. No other education is comparable ; only the experiencing of "despair" sets the enduring "seal" upon the soul. One recalls that beauty and truth, alike in their effect, are for her the agents of supreme human fulfilment and are accompanied by the complex sensations indescribable except in such paradoxical terms as rapturous pain. The slant of light, its illumination epitomizing the glorious sublimity of nature, would symbolize for Emily Dickinson the ultimate realization of truth and beauty. The immensity of light's compass, the intangibility of its substance, the mystery of its origin, the all-pervasive immediacy of its presence would create in her the sudden awareness of her own relationship to the natural world and yet of the inevitable change of this relationship at death. The awareness that she must cease to see the light gives her present vision its searing acuteness.

The internal experience in this poem is not talked about but is realized in a web of images that constitutes the poem's statement, beginning with one drawn from nature, or rather from the firmament above it, and returning to it in the end with a significant change of meaning. These multiple images exemplifying the protean condition of despair are vividly discrete, but they grow out of each other and into each other with a fitness that creates the intended meaning in shock after shock of recognition. Its amorphous quality is embodied at the outset in 'light', a diffused substance that can be apprehended but not grasped. Further, this is a slanting light, as uncertain of source and indirect in impact as the feeling of despair often is. Finally, it is that pale light of 'Winter Afternoons', when both the day and the year seem to be going down to death, the seasonal opposite of summer which symbolized for her the fulness and joy of living. It is when he feels winter in his soul, one remembers, that Melville's Ishmael begins his exploration of the meaning of despair. Next, by the shift of simile, this desolation becomes 'like the Heft/ Of Cathedral Tunes.' The nebulous has now been made palpable, by converting light waves into sound waves whose weight can be felt by the whole body. The strong provincialism, 'Heft' (smoothed away to 'Weight' by former editors), carries both the meaning of ponderousness and the great effort of heaving in order to test it, according to her Lexicon. This homely word also clashes effectively with the grand ring of 'Cathedral Tunes', those produced by carillon offering the richest possibilities of meaning. Since this music 'oppresses', the connotation of funereal is added to the heavy resonance of all pealing bells. And since the double meaning of 'Heft' carries through, despair is likened to both the weight of these sounds on the spirit and the straining to lift the imponderable tonnage of cast bronze.

The religious note on which the prelude ends, 'Cathedral Tunes', is echoed in the language of the central stanzas. In its ambiguousness 'Heavenly Hurt' could refer to the pain of paradisiac ecstasy, but more immediately this seems to be an adjective of agency, from heaven, rather than an attributive one. The hurt is inflicted from above, 'Sent us of the Air', like the 'Slant of light' that is its antecedent. In this context that natural image takes on a new meaning, again with the aid of her Lexicon which gives only one meaning for 'slant' as a noun, 'an oblique reflection or gibe'. It is then a mocking light, like the heavenly hurt that comes from the sudden instinctive awareness of man's lot since the Fall, doomed to mortality and irremediable suffering. This is indeed despair, though not in the theological sense unless Redemption is denied also. As Hopkins phrases it in 'Spring and Fall', for the young life there coming to a similar realization, 'It is the blight man was born for.'

Because of this it is beyond human correction, 'None may teach it--Any.' Though it penetrates it leaves 'no scar', as an outward sign of healing, nor any internal wound that can be located and alleviated. What it leaves is 'internal difference', the mark of all significant 'Meanings.' When the psyche is once stricken with the pain of such knowledge it can never be the same again. The change is final and irrevocable, sealed. The Biblical sign by which God claims man for his own has been shown in the poems of heavenly bridal to be a 'Seal', the ring by which the beloved is married into immortal life. But to be redeemed one must first be mortal, and be made conscious of one's mortality. The initial and overwhelming impact of this can lead to a state of hopelessness, unaware that the 'Seal Despair' might be the reverse side of the seal of ecstasy. So, when first stamped on the consciousness it is an 'affliction'. But it is also 'imperial. . . Sent us of the Air', the heavenly kingdom where God sits enthroned, and from the same source can come Redemption, though not in this poem.

By an easy transition from one insubstantial image to another, 'Air' back to 'a certain Slant of light', the concluding stanza returns to the surface level of the winter afternoon. As the sun drops toward the horizon just before setting, 'the Landscape listens' in apprehension that the very light which makes it exist as a landscape is about to be extinguished; 'Shadows', which are about to run out to infinity in length and merge with each other in breadth until all is shadow, 'hold their breath'. This is the effect created by the slanting light 'When it comes'. Of course no such things happen in nature, and it would be pathetic fallacy to pretend they did. The light does not inflict this suffering nor is the landscape the victim. Instead, these are just images of despair.

Further examination of the images in the poem reveals their extraordinary degree of consistency and appropriateness. The light is presented in its most effective form. The 'slant' indicates that the light is refracted so that one may see the beam or ray itself and not just an illuminated surface. The slant is explained by 'afternoons'. Sunset is near, for 'winter afternoons' are short. The terms 'winter' and 'afternoon' both are suggestive of the end of life. The lustre and yellow warmth of the light stand out in striking relief in austere winter. Light compared with cathedral tunes demonstrates a consummate use of imagery in which the profoundest impressions of one sense are called forth to describe equally profound impressions of another sense. The senses of sight and hearing, as well as an emotional tone and a feeling of muscular tenseness in opposing weight, are all involved in the brief stanza. The nature of the paradoxical 'Heavenly Hurt' is made evident by the image of cathedral tunes. Most people are sensible of the sober disquietude that may be stimulated by great, solemn music, if not by the beauty of nature. The 'internal difference' is, of course, the essential difference for Emily Dickinson rather than any outward change.

The significance of the slant of light is also within. The sudden, inward change is so thorough that the poet, holding her breath and listening, sees her own emotional state reflected in the very landscape and shadows. The emotion, too intense to last, subsides as the slant of light lengthens and lowers into the gray of twilight. Then " 'tis like the distance/ On the look of death." The feeling of softened, lengthened distances as seen at dusk, the poignancy in the departure of something precious, the resigned awareness of death—not felt with the acute sensations of before but contemplated dispassionately—all are included in this solemn final image.

The chief characteristic of the feeling inspired by this poem is its painful oppressiveness. "Oppresses", "weight", "hurt", "despair", and "affliction" convey this aspect. A large component in it is probably consciousness of the fact of death, though this is probably not the whole of its content nor is this consciousness necessarily fully formulated by the mind. Yet here we see the subtle connection between the hour and the mood. For the season is winter, when the year is approaching its end. And the time is late afternoon (winter afternoons are short at best, and the light slants).

when the day is failing. The suggestion of death is caught up by the weighty cathedral tunes (funeral music possibly—but hymns are also much concerned with death) and by "the distance on the look of death." The stillness of the hour (the landscape listens, Shadows hold their breath") is also suggestive of the stillness of death.

The mood gives 'heavenly' hurt. 'Heavenly' suggests the immateriality of the hurt, which leaves "no scar" ; the source of the sunlight—the sky ; the ultimate source of both sunlight and death—God. The hurt is given internally "where the meanings are"—that is, in the soul, the psyche, or the mind—that part of one which assigns "meanings"—consciously or intuitively—to life and to phenomena like this. "None may teach it anything"—Both the sunlight and the mood it induces are beyond human correction or alleviation ; they are final and irrevocable—"sealed". There is no lifting this seal—this despair. "When it goes, 'tis like the distance on the look of death"—The lines call up the image of the stare in the eyes of a dead man, not focused, but fixed on the distance. Also, "distance" suggests the awful distance between the living and the dead—part of the implicit content of the mood. Notice that the slanted ray and the mood are still with us here, but are also going. The final remarkable image reiterates the components of the hour and the mood—oppressiveness, solemnity, stillness, death. But it hints also at relief—hopes that there will soon be a 'distance' between the poet and her experience.

20

I Taste A Liquor Never Brewed

(First Published 1861)

I. TEXT

I taste a liquor never brewed—
From Tankards scooped in Pearl—
Not all the Vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an alcohol !

Inebriate of Air—am I—
And Debauchee of Dew—
Reeling—thro endless summer days—
From inns of Molten Blue—

When "Landlords" turn the drunken Bee
Out of the Foxglove's door—
When Butterflies—renounce their "drams"—
I shall but drink the more !

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats—
And Saints—to windows run—
To see the little Tippler
Leaning against the—Sun—

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This is one of Emily Dickinson's most dazzling poems. In it, the poetess, drunk with the joy of living, expresses her transport in terms of a cosmic spree. Borrowing from the humorous tall tale its hyperbolic fantasy and other extravagant techniques, she writes :

I taste a liquor never brewed—
From Tankards scooped in Pearl—
Not all the Vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an Alcohol !

The temptation can hardly be resisted to read this as a parody of Emerson's transcendental rendering of poetic inspiration in 'Bacchus', which begins :

Bring me wine, but wine which never grew
In the belly of the grape...

It adds to the burlesque that hers is a malty brew instead of the traditional Dionysiac wine. Having repudiated the false, she proceeds to extol the true in soaring imagery :

Inebriate of Air—am I—
And Debauchee of Dew—
Reeling—thro endless summer days—
From inns of Molten Blue—

Even so Emerson describes as nourished by the 'dews of heaven' the true vines which produce the archetypal

Wine that is shed
Like the torrents of the sun
Up the horizon walls...

All nature participates in her bacchanal :

When 'Landlords' turn the drunken Bee
Out of the Foxglove's door—
When Butterflies—renounce their 'drams'—
I shall but drink the more !

At this point the poems diverge widely. Nature is brought into Emerson's revel too but in a very different way :

That I intoxicated,
And by the draught assimilated,
May float at pleasure through all natures ;
The bird-language rightly spell,
And that which roses say so well.

His wine is the Plotinian 'flowing' of divine spirit. Drunk with it, the poet merges with nature, breaks through convention, annihilates time and space, and recovers his lost heaven. The 'remembering wine', by analogy with the Platonic doctrine of reminiscence', enables him once again to draw on the blue tablets 'The dancing Pleiads and eternal men', as on the first day of creation. Dickinson declines to participate in any such inebriate visions. Her beery spree lands her in heaven too, but in a different condition. She continues to drink

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats—
And Saints—to windows run—
To see the little Tippler
Leaning against the—Sun—

This unorthodox scene of hurrahing in heaven, with its bold metaphor converting the sun into a celestial lamp-post, may well be a comic version of spiritual intoxication as set forth in the Book of Revelation. But the parallels with 'Bacchus' are even more striking. The close echoes of its language up to a climactic point and the sudden turn to an opposite conclusion seem to suggest a conscious parody of its doctrines. At any rate, neither here nor elsewhere is there any evidence that she accepted the mystical bases of Emerson's transcendental aesthetic : that the poet can absorb the spirit that energizes nature and so achieve merger with the Oversoul. Parody or not, this is simply a humorous fable of the poet's inspiration, drunk with the joy of life and elevated into a very sensuous heaven.

Yet there is significant meaning to be drawn from it too. Cosmic inebriation is another deliberately extravagant metaphor to go along with thunder, fires, and volcanoes. For hypersensitivity to natural beauty was another of the pressures that produced her poetry. In a late poem she wrote :

So gay a Flower
Bereaves the Mind
As if it were a Woe—
Is Beauty an Affliction—then ?
Tradition ought to know—

And in two letters near the end of her life she said, first that she lived 'In a World too full of Beauty for Peace', and again : 'How vast is the chastisement of Beauty, given us by our Maker !' At times her reaction to beauty in nature sounds like the lyric cry of pain that had become a convention since the early nineteenth century :

Beauty crowds me till I die
Beauty mercy have on me
But if I expire today
Let it be in sight of thee—

But this has less kinship with her romantic predecessors than with Jonathan Edwards, who held that the visible universe is 'an emanation of God for the pure joy of creation, in which the creatures find their justification by yielding consent to the beauty of the whole even though it slay them.' She rejected the theological dogma implied in this thesis, for she kept God and nature sharply differentiated, even while she seized for her own purposes its aesthetic doctrine.

Beauty is her name for the ecstasy with which we perceive that nature is the process of dying into immortality. She also kept man and nature separate, but as a sensitive and perceptive poet she was constantly drawn to speculate on its possible meanings for her, a subject that must be explored further in order to define how the poet makes use of nature. She herself has left a subtle aphorism defining its relation to her poetry : 'Nature is a Haunted House—but Art—a House that tries to be haunted.'

Emily Dickinson's unconventional rhetoric and unorthodox versification puzzled and mystified the literary critics of her own time. Some of them went so far as to suggest modifications in her 'grammar'. The view of Thomas Bailley Aldrich is representative of such critics. He writes : "In the first volume of her poetical chaos is a little poem which needs only slight revision in the initial stanza in order to make it worthy of ranking with some of the odd swallow flights in Heine's lyrical *intermezzo*. I have ventured to desecrate this stanza by tossing a ryhme into it, as the other stanzas happened to rhyme, and here print the lyric, hoping the reader will not accuse me of overvaluing it :—

I taste a liquor never brewed
In vats upon the Rhine ;
No tankard ever held a draught
Of alcohol like mine

Certainly those inns of molten blue, and that disreputable honey-gatherer who got himself turned out-of-doors at the sign of the Foxglove, are very taking matters. I know of more important things that interest me less. There are three or four bits in this kind in Miss Dickinson's book ; but for the most part the ideas totter and toddle, not having learned to walk. In spite of this, several of the quatrains are curiously touching, they have such a pathetic air of yearning to be poems...It is plain that Miss Dickinson possessed an extremely unconventional and grotesque fancy. She was deeply tinged by the mysticism of Blake, and strongly influenced by the mannerism of Emerson. The very way she tied her bonnet-strings, prepatory to one of her nunlike walks in her claustral garden, must have been Emersonian...the incoherence and formlessness of her... versicles are fatal...but an eccentric, dreamy, half-educated recluse in an out-of-the-way New England village (or anywhere else) cannot with impunity set at defiance the laws of gravitation and grammar." Genevieve Taggard, however, takes this critic to task and observes : "Idiotic meddler ! What has he dared to do to one of the most delicious lines in the English language !...From tankards scooped in pearl enjoins our attention, after being so vandalized. Quite apart from the sounds received and carried on by it, it runs the voice from the *a's* in 'tankards' to the *o's* in 'scooped' and then produces the word 'pearl', on which to let them culminate ; the *nk* and the *r* in 'tankard' catching all the other consonants as the ripple of tone-colour runs down the line. If anyone needs the pale device of rhyme after such interplay of sound, culminating in 'Yield such an alcohol', he is tone-deaf and deserves to be so. But he should be told that, while he was hearing nothing, the stanza as a whole has been giving off the variations on the sound of *l*, firmly placed in the middle of the first line, at the end of the second, near the beginning of the third to culminate in 'yield' and the *l's* of 'alcohol'. The next stanza is equally, although differently, inebriate."

21

Because I Could Not Stop For Death

(First Published 1890)

I. TEXT

Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.

We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility—

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather—He passed Us—
The Dews drew quivering and chill—
For only Gossamer, my Gown—
My Tippet—only Tulle—

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice—in the Ground—

Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

In some of her death poems, Emily Dickinson attempts an imaginative construction of her own death : tries, in effect, to catch herself at the very centre of the act of dying. Her ability to find images, actions, and personifications that would transfix death at the very point of striking : this seems an ability that was entirely unique with Emily Dickinson.

One of the best poems written by her on this theme is "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" or "Chariot". The poem seems to rest upon a narrative basis—that is, involving characters, an episode, a plot-line of sorts—and the narrative, in turn, has certain literary associations. Up to the door, there come riding not one but two callers : observe that the carriage is occupied by both Death and Immortality. Presumably they dally for a little, then presently they ride off with the Lady-Poet into the sunset. Death comes as a gentleman, motivated by honourable intentions, and concerned only with carrying the Lady to her bridal rooms in Heaven. By the same token, the leisurely pace taken by Death bespeaks a tact and a consideration for human feelings, both of which seem highly admirable. Above all, Death-as-lover affixes the part played by Immortality. This silent partner on the drive must be visualized as nothing less than a chaperone. Saying nothing, but always sternly ensconced on a rear seat, Immortality sanctifies the relationship between Death and Lady, keeps the relationship beyond reproach, ensures that the journey into darkness will have a respectable ending. Immortality's function, when we stop to think about it, could hardly be more proper, therefore—or more strictly orthodox. But seen from a different angle, Death can no longer be thought of as a kindness ; he is someone depraved and malevolent. In the slow, deliberate pacing of his journey, we perhaps glimpse the arrogance of Death, his bland disrespect for human wishes. Certainly the flimsiness of the Lady's apparel—"For only Gossamer, my Gown—/ My Tippet—only Tulle—" can only recall us to how vulnerable humankind is when Death attacks. But the greatest change is reserved for Immortality, who, in the second reading of "The Chariot", abruptly ceases to chaperone, and becomes, instead, party to a wicked fraud. As Death now violates, so Immortality now betrays. Both have used the demeanour of courtliness in order to deceive ; the victim of both is the helpless human being.

Our reaction to the total poem will hinge ultimately upon how we have interpreted these narrative details. Regardless of which version seems preferable, the journey itself deserves detailed analysis. As the expedition proceeds, the Lady-Poet is leaving life ; it disappears behind her like a receding landscape. Emily Dickinson's style, from the third through the sixth stanzas, masterfully demonstrates how differing qualities of language can be used to suggest modes of being which are wholly separate from one another. Consider the language in lines five to twelve. It emphasizes four qualities : light (the sun imagery), warmth and vitality (the children and 'the fields of Gazing Grain'), and incessant motion (drove, strove, the repeated 'passed'). More significantly still, this is a hard and crisply pictorial language ; the schoolyard, the fields, and the sunset are all made to loom up off the page with the exactitude of sharp little etchings. Commencing with line thirteen, however, a change occurs. Here darkness ('the sun is gone'), cold ('the Dews drew quivering and chill'), and stasis ('we paused') become evident. The writing as a whole seems gradually to be overspread by vagueness. Though the individual images in lines nineteen and twenty are still clear enough—"The Roof was scarcely visible—/ The Cornice—in the Ground—" the picture into which the images fit remains blurred and indefinite, refuses to come into focus.

Emily Dickinson's aim, of course, is to record the passage from life, where everything is tangible and hence easily apprehended, to the "otherness" of death, a realm in which shapes necessarily become obscure and mysterious and can no longer be readily seen. Partly, she manages the transition by shifting from light to darkness, from warmth to cold, from motion to rest. In addition to these rather commonplace techniques, she achieves her effect through juxtaposing a precise and pictorial diction with a language that is left deliberately opaque and fuzzy. This gradual merging of the familiar into the strange, the known into the unimaginable, constitutes one of the supremely great moments in her poetry.

But what, aside from the grave, is the destination of the chariot? Are the horses pointed beyond anything more than the house in the ground? Emily Dickinson specifically declines to say. The word with which she ends the text is *Eternity*—in this context a strikingly ambiguous word, one that can grow meaningful only in the light of our response to the narrative situation. Provided we saw Death as the gallant lover and Immortality as a protector, we will presume that dying represented a benefit, and that the Lady-Poet was borne by her escorts to an Eternity of immortal life. Provided we saw Death as seducer and Immortality as his partner in crime, however, we must infer a vastly different outcome, supposing that the Lady was raped of life, and afterward abandoned to the earth and to the void of Eternal nothingness. Between these alternatives, Emily Dickinson pauses indecisively. She first cloaks Death in a form that will provoke two sets of associations; then she leaves open and unresolved the question of which set is really the more applicable to the poem.

Her uncertainty has been vigorously rebuked by Yvor Winters. Winters sees the conclusion of the poem as involving a "semi-playful pretence of familiarity with the posthumous experience of eternity," and he declares himself against so hopeless an enterprise. He writes: "In so far as it concentrates on the life that is being left behind, it is wholly successful; in so far as it attempts to experience the death to come, it is fraudulent, however exquisitely, and in this it falls below her finest achievement." And he sums up: "The poem ends in irresolution, in the sense that it ends in a statement that is not offered seriously...It is possible to solve any problem of insoluble experience by retreating a step and defining the boundary at which comprehension ceases, and by then making the necessary moral adjustments to that boundary; this in itself is an experience both final and serious..." Winter's premises about the poem are inaccurate. It is not really a poem about the topography of the "undiscovered country". It is rather, Emily Dickinson's legitimate attempt to imagine the death which she *knows* must come to her and to spell out her responses to this inevitable experience. Furthermore, the irresolution in the text does not derive from the fact that we have crossed a "boundary" and are walking where no mortal has the right or (as yet) the knowledge to tread. Instead, the irresolution comes about because, when Emily Dickinson thinks about her own death—when she seeks to judge it morally—she cannot honestly make up her mind about what her feelings and her attitudes are.

Returning to the poem, we find this psychological ambivalence at every turn. In one sense, the poet is obviously repelled by the prospect of dying. This aversion expresses itself in the idea that Death violates, or in the conception of death as an inexorable journey, or in the stress upon the utter captivity of the human being who travels with Death. But simultaneously with the fears it evokes, the prospect of dying also holds out a definite appeal. This attraction is made manifest not only by the possibility that Death is an ardent lover : the pleasant fellow who brings a pleasing experience. We may glean the attraction as well from other revealing elements of the poem—from the air of constant excitement that accompanies the carriage drive, from the lure of the unknown, from the relaxed nature of the writing, its easy, graceful, almost jaunty tone.

After looking at the poem thematically, now let us try to analyze it to find out the structure of meaning available in it. The first stanza describes the narrator as so engrossed in household activities that she cannot spare time for death's call. Only his kindness and consideration compel her to steal a few minutes for a short ride. Her reluctance hides the harsh reality that she has no choice, that her carriage is a hearse, and that the lover's outing is a sombre journey to the grave. Even immortality's presence, openly hinting at the soul's departure from the body and the longer pilgrimage into eternity, is barely acknowledged and quickly forgotten. This idea of a casual trip is expanded in the second stanza with the key phrase "my labour and my leisure". For death actually heightens one's perception of time. The precious, fleeting qualities of life, its mixture of work and joy, are now freshly appreciated. One regrets the loss of pleasures, while being glad to forfeit life's terrible pressures and fears.

With the reiteration of "passed" in the third stanza and the increasing awareness of time, the slow journey begins to hasten : "We passed the School, where Children strove / At recess—in the Ring—/ We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—We passed the Setting Sun—". As the corpse is physically carried through the town to the outlying fields, the soul finally crosses through the barriers of temporal time and the mind reviews its past life : childhood, schooling, the ripeness of maturity, and finally the darkening red of evening age. Significantly even the children's world is a mixture of play ("Recess") and tensions ("strove"), enclosed by the ring of society's rules and customs. The physical and spiritual implications of "we passed" are intensified by the "Gazing Grain" image, which both mocks and parallels the inert corpse. The rich grain gazes indifferently, almost hostilely.

There can be no such equivalent death in nature, only a laying fallow after the harvest, followed by an eventual spring rebirth. Yet nature's eternal hope echoes the presence and purpose of the other passenger, immortality. The final image, a traditional comparison of a sunset's declining warmth and brightness to old age, prepares for the final stage of the journey.

Stanza four marks a definite transition from the accelerating tone of the country outing. Even the metrical shift from a four—to a three-stress line technically indicates a new mood. The poet corrects her earlier statement about passing the sun, for nature controls, not man. With increasing darkness comes a dampness and chill, heightened by the heavy alliteration and sharp "i" sounds. Now the poet is frighteningly aware of how inadequate her preparations for the journey have been. The sheer wedding gown offers no protection from the cold, and it indicates how completely her sophisticated caller has deceived her with his assurances of a warm and friendly trip. Still, death has further surprises for his alarmed companion. Her bridal chamber is a horrifying combination of an actual mansion and the swelling mound of a graveyard tomb. Here the terror is achieved without any morbid description of mouldering bones and worms so frequently used by Poe. The tenuous bond between life and death is "scarcely visible" as the poet finally perceives her destination. Just as the reader prepares for a gruesome entry into the tomb, the perspective changes. With the end of the journey death departs and the poet reviews the trip from the vantage point of eternity. The sudden change from present reality to the new dimension of limitless time shows how completely death severs all connections with life. This surprising shift jars the reader after the beguiling leisureliness of the journey, while the final image of the horses' heads turned toward eternity magnificently conveys the awesome power and impervious majesty of death. The dramatic emphasis placed upon the word "Eternity" highlights the separation between man's limited earthly existence and the expanse of infinity. Paradoxically the word not only conveys the chill finality of death but also indicates that the soul has now ascended into a new state of existence. In fact, "Eternity" hints at the possibility of religious immortality, which was faintly suggested in stanza one.

The poem masterfully handles the effect of death's unexpected visit upon the victim, viewing her progression from flustered self-pleasure and comfortable anticipation to gradual fear and doubt into a full realization of death's deception and terrifying purpose. Throughout, death is seen from various perspectives : as a welcome relief from life's tensions ; as a force which heightens one's satisfaction with life ; as a lover gently conveying one to hidden pleasures ; as a cynical caller who poses beneath a cordial exterior ; and finally as a solemn guide leading one to the threshold of immortality. In this poem Emily Dickinson's profound views of death and immortality are rendered with an artistic perfection that very few lyrics surpass.

22

I Heard A Fly Buzz—When I Died

(First Published 1896)

I. TEXT

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air—
Between the Heaves of Storm—

The Eyes around—had wrung them dry—
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset—when the King
Be witnessed—in the Room—

I willed my Keepsakes—Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable—and then it was
There interposed a Fly—

With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—
Between the Light—and me—
And then the Windows failed— and then
I could not see to see—

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Some of Emily Dickinson's best lyrics on death considered the sensations of the dying person, the physical experiences as the soul leaves the body. In all these poems tension is established by contrasting the inertness of the dead person with the movement of the living and the external growth of nature. "I heard a Fly buzz—/ when I died" contrasts the expectations of death with its realistic occurrence. The traditional Christian belief that death leads to eternal happiness is undercut by the appearance of an insignificant, distracting fly.

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air—
Between the Heaves of Storm—

The Eyes around—had wrung them dry—
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset—when the King
Be witnessed—in the Room—

The opening lines jolt as the buzz of a fly ludicrously interrupts the awesome approach of death. After this initial shock the poet describes the atmosphere of the sick room. The moment is tense ; the soul is poised, ready to depart ; and the stillness in the room is like the deceptively calm centre of a hurricane. The second stanza considers the dry-eyed and expectant onlookers, as they crowd closer to view the last dying movements. The scene appears morbid to modern readers ; yet it was common practice in Emily Dickinson's time to observe the dying. For those with a religious faith, the moment of death meant that a soul left its body to enter paradise. Thus the dying person's final actions were carefully scrutinized for an indication of immortality's approach. Even Emily Dickinson avidly hoped that the last words or gestures before death would ease some of her own doubts about immortality. The final death struggle of soul and body is termed an "Onset", as the king sweeps majestically in with the treasures of paradise. Like disciples giving testimony to the grandeur of God, the onlookers expect to witness this sublime ceremony.

The last two stanzas bring the climax :

I willed my Keepsakes—Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable—and then it was
There interposed a Fly—

With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—
Between the light—and me—
And then the Windows failed—and then
I could not see to see—

The final acts of the dying person are presented with a crisp detachment. In its careful preparation for Death's entrance, the soul rigidly controls the final moments. The pun in "Signed" and "Assignable" ironically illustrates death's supreme power, for only worthless documents, empty phrases, curious mementos, and a corrupting body can be left behind. The irony increases as the soul precisely arranges everything and waits confidently for death. Now the grand moment is at hand, but unfortunately a fly interrupts the ceremony.

Like so much of life's experience the fly comes at the wrong time, as a petty irritant which distracts from the magnificent approach of death. What the dying person fails to realize is that the fly signalizes death's presence. Its stumbling blue buzz, an apt synaesthetic image that conveys the confusion of the dying mind, imitates the pattern of life, where moments of beauty and confidence are juxtaposed with ugliness and uncertainty. The fly comes between the light and the dying person, not just blocking physical sight but obscuring the radiance of immortality as well. The final line captures the desperate intensity of the person's struggle for life. Instead of the calm assurance of the earlier stanzas, the person now fails to recognize death's arrival and fights to prevent subjection. Pathetically the person claims that the windows fail, not his eyesight. "I could not see to see" is the last effort at self-control. In these few seconds the soul says that it could not will its eyes open for a final view. One of the deepest ironies here is the soul's confidence that it still controls the body. Only the reader knows the hopelessness of these attempts and how aptly the fly symbolizes life and death, since its buzz is associated with daily household activities, while its food often consists of carrion. The whole poem satirizes the traditional view of death as a peaceful release from life's pressures and a glorious entrance into immortality. Emily Dickinson sees only disappointment, a buzzing fly, and the terrible attempts of a soul to prolong life.

If a narrative structure offered the best approach to "The Chariot", the key to this text would appear to lie in Emily Dickinson's central image. The fly dominates three of the four stanzas; in stanza two, the one place where it is not explicitly mentioned, we will perhaps come to feel its presence the most keenly of all. Consequently, the questions likeliest to prove provocative are: why did Miss Dickinson choose the image? how does it operate in the poem? what are the layers of significance it eventually accumulates?

At its simplest, the image is a purely aesthetic device. In "The Chariot" Emily Dickinson had specified death by using a personification that caught him at the very moment of his onset. Now, she works the other way around, portraying death not as a force which comes but as the progressive lapse of life. The fly, active and vital, is perfectly tailored to her method. So long as the fly's gyrations can be seen or its noises distract, the poem is positioned in the everyday world of sense. As the fly disappears, sense is ebbing with it. When the fly is gone, the speaker herself has been transported to an ineffable other-world. The systematic blotting out of the insect becomes a way of measuring the sort of progression which it would otherwise be impossible to imagine.

A more complex possibility is broached when we go on to think of the fly as feeder upon carrion. This means that, during her last moments alive, the speaker beholds an awful vision of what is to come—glimpses, in the now symbolic activities of the fly, a hint that stink and corruption are death's only legacies. Her perception grows more appalling when it is contrasted with the naive assumptions of stanza two. There, mourners, gathered round the bedside, are awaiting something akin to a divine revelation. As life passes, they expect a King—a Sign of Beatitude—to appear:

> And Breaths were gathering firm
> For that last Onset—when the King
> Be witnessed—in the Room—

Then the Sign is made, right enough; but it is made to the speaker, and made in the form of the loathsome insect. The point seems unmistakable. With a Lucretian ferocity that outdoes Lucretius, Emily Dickinson reminds us that, for all we can really tell, the fly and the King may be identical. Her image belies any likelihood of immortal life by suggesting that within the precincts of the grave decay will be all and the maggot will take ultimate and absolute dominion.

Yet, if this view opens the way to unqualified despair, do we not find that the fly lends itself to still a third interpretation? At its most demonic—even as the potential destroyer of dead human flesh—the insect continues to represent life. Dipping, buzzing, vibrantly on the move, it remains the only animate object in a poem which moves steadily toward inanimation. Surely it is not accidental that Emily Dickinson has elected to symbolize life through the ugly annoyance: that she has located in an experience connoting the height of disturbance, discomfort, and nastiness an ideal emblem for the world from which her speaker departs. What the identification of fly with life requires is a radically different reading of the poem. It forces us to see that while death may carry one ineluctably to the fly, still it is no less true that only through death can the fly be escaped. More forcefully than in "The Chariot" Emily Dickinson has stressed the gruesomeness of dying. As in "The Chariot", however, she never quite commits herself to the gruesome, for she keeps entertaining the possibility that with death there will come a peace and tranquillity that are denied the individual in every other condition. When the *windows fail* in line fourteen, the speaker has lost her *Keepsakes*: her entitlements to life and to a continuing identity. But, beyond the fly and safely past the *Heaves of Storm*, she has also shut out a world with enough unpleasant features to make the leaving of it an experience that is at least bearable.

23

I Felt A Funeral in My Brain

(First Published 1896)

I. TEXT

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading—treading—till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through—

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum—
Kept beating—beating—till I thought
My Mind was going numb—

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space—began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here—

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down—
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing—then—

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This poem presents a manifestly disturbing portrayal of death. With its detailed presentation of a complete funeral as felt through the ebbing sensations of a dead person, this poem borders on the morbid in portraying the terrible struggle that the separation of the body from the soul occasions. Here is no hope of immortality, only a despairing plunge into an eternal abyss. Still, as many critics have noted, the funeral service is not merely exploited for sensational effects, but it has an allegorical significance. The physical death symbolizes spiritual decease and perhaps a momentary insight into the nature of infinity. The opening stanza sets the tone of the poem.

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading—treading—till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through—

The scene opens with the mourners filing past the exposed body before the actual funeral service begins. The atmosphere is oppressive and the incessant pounding of muffled feet seems physically to torment the brain. In the next stanza the mourners are seated and the funeral begins. The formality of this ceremony penetrates the soul like throbbing drums to induce a drugged weariness.

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum—
Kept beating—beating—till I thought
My mind was going numb—

In stanza three, bolts of lead trample across her soul as the coffin is closed and carried outside the church.

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead again,
Then Space—began to toll,

And the bells sounding in the background temporarily thrust her into infinity.

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here—

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down, and down—
And hit a World, at every Plunge,
And Finished knowing—then—

The tension increases as the body is carried to the grave. The bells obliterate all other sensations, casting the soul upon eternity itself, but without hope of resurrection. Reeling under these continual blows, the soul experiences complete disintegration with the tumbling of the casket into the grave. "Finished knowing" completes the loss of conscious control as the soul swirls into the irrational unknown, into an indifferent universe.

The emphasis on dying sensations and failing powers suggests death's dreadful isolation. On another level the initial phrase "in my Brain" hints that this physical death represents some terrible emotional pain or loss that brings an overwhelming sense of despair. Since the soul has lost its reason for living, the person ceases to exist. In an original interpretation of the poem, George Monteiro holds that it deals with the direct knowledge of the absolute when the soul gains a temporary insight into the infinite. Death symbolizes this, since it is one of the few crucial experiences that reveals a glimpse of final things. Monteiro concludes that the poem combines both triumph and failure, for man must return to reality after breaking through the barriers of sense into infinity.

In order to comprehend the poem more fully, let us first be clear about what the poem is not. For one thing, it is not meant to be a description of the funeral in any objective or formal sense. Though the funeral exists, it has been internalized, so that it takes place in the *Brain*. Nor is the poem an attempt to imagine the funeral. The introductory verb is *felt*, not imagined or fancied. Nor can it be read successfully as a dream about the funeral. That interpretation is ruled out by the last nine lines, which suggest, not the relief of waking up—not an emergence from the nightmare within—but which are indicative, rather, that the inner processes have somehow been destructive. It is this idea of a total destruction at the climax which pinpoints the real theme of the poem. Obviously, Emily Dickinson has been concerned with the breakup of rational powers, with the onset and triumph of lunacy. In these terms, her use of the funeral becomes clear. The funeral has provided her with a set of symbols, through which the speaker's gradual conquest by madness can be dramatized. For Emily Dickinson, the funeral is the doleful, the shattering, above all the disruptive, ceremony in the world without. Accordingly, she has brought the ceremony into the realm of the mind, where it symbolizes the morbidity, the death, decay and dissolution, of the world within.

Once that point is established, the concrete details of the funeral service may be seen to function like players in a psychological drama. Consider the development of the eight opening lines. Ordinarily, the observances portrayed here would be thought of as among the most intensely formal activities in human experience : the stately procession of pallbearers, or perhaps of mourners, passing before an open casket ; the slow, solemn tempo of the funeral service. In this context, of course, these ordinarily formal rituals have been used to suggest the exact opposites of formality. They stand for the first alarming signs of incoherence. Feet and *Drum* alike represent some intolerable pressure—some relentless tattoo—that bears down upon the brain, and against which the brain is increasingly powerless to protect itself. Under the heavy, incessant *treading*, the speaker feels, in line four, that the ordinary patterns and configurations of sense are breaking up. By line eight, her predicament has worsened, for now the uninterrupted *beating* within threatens to paralyze her mind—to render it numb and hence incapable of further thought.

The air of impending madness is then thickened by the references to *Box* and *Boots*. In one sense, both these heavy objects simply add anew to the insufferable weight beneath which the speaker's mind has already commenced to crack. In another, they suggest the rite of burial—but burial from within, so that the mysterious pallbearers are readying the speaker's rational faculties (and not her physical being) for interment. But since the *Boots* (certainly) and the casket (presumably) are made of lead, the images bear still a third function. As in "After great pain", *Lead* introduces the gray swirl, the colour of gradual extinction. This time, however, it is not the gray peace of coma that is implied. It is, instead, the gray blur of a mind too blurred by sickness to make the old distinctions or to perceive the old relationships.

Thus far, then, all the action has occurred inside the head. The speaker has listened, in fear and awe, to a cacophany within; to the clashing sounds of her own mental crackup. But now, from lines twelve through sixteen, the theatre suddenly widens to include the world outside. From every quarter of her external surroundings, there seems to beat in upon the speaker a medley that exactly corresponds, to the medley in her mind. The *Heavens* appear to her to have become a gigantic *Bell*, tolling out a single refrain, which is the fact of the speaker's disorder. She, in turn, fancies herself to be all *Ear*, feverishly attuned to this single sound. In so hallucinatory a countryside, *Silence* is the stranger because, in fact, all is noise—there is no *Silence*. The speaker is equally a solitary outsider, because, even in the throes of derangement, she still has wit enough to see her alienation from every ordinary experience and to recognize that she is being cut off from all the commonplace responses. Though the funeral images seem to disappear from four of these five lines, they have actually been instrumental in keeping us alert to where we are. The images have defined inner symptoms, which are now transferred outward, until the landscape around her becomes a mirror of the speaker's own hysteria.

The images are quickly resumed as the final stanza opens. The ***Plank in Reason*** (reminding us of the scaffolding across an open grave) stands symbolically for the speaker's only remaining toehold in rationality. Now it breaks, collapses beneath the combined weight of feet, drum, and coffin, which are the symbols of her breakdown. With this last prop demolished, the speaker's wreckage is complete. She must be buried—which is to say, must consummate her journey into madness by spiralling down and down through all the successive stages of unreason. Superficially, her descent resembles the falling away in "After great pain". But there is a vital difference. The "letting go" there amounted to entering a state of trance where all feeling was extinguished. Here, on the other hand, it is the obliteration of reason which falling involves. At the end, the speaker has *Got through knowing*: that is, she has finished with thought, has passed outside the realm of ordinary cognition. If this is true, she has also passed beyond the possibility for orderly and coherent speech—a fact which makes the concluding *then* hardly less than a stroke of genius. *Then* does not really terminate the process which the poem has been describing. Nevertheless, it denotes an absolute breaking point in that it marks off the communicable part of the process from an aftermath which could be expressed only through the shriek, or gibberish, or wild, undifferentiated raving.

"I felt a Funeral" is made the great poem that it is by the particularizing quality of the symbol. Through the symbols of death and burial, she has bodied forth the sick and scrambled mind, approaching disintegration. Through her symbolic account of a landscape gone mad, she has given us the exact lineaments of hysteria. Through the funeral images, with their suggestion of a passage from one state to another, she has shown us the divided personality, gradually losing control of its rational self and lapsing into the "other" self of insanity. A few of her symbolic images—the *Bell* and the outsized *Ear* are prime examples—possess the sort of grotesqueness and distortion which might be associated with surrealistic writing.

24

Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers

(First Published 1862)

I. TEXT

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—
Untouched by Morning—
And Untouched by Noon—
Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection—
Rafter of satin,
And Roof of stone.

Light laughs the breeze
In her Castle above them—
Babbles the Bee in a stolid Ear,
Pipe the Sweet Birds in ignorant cadence—
Ah, what sagacity perished here !

Grand go the Years—in the Crescent—above them—
Worlds scoop their Arcs—
And Firmaments—row—
Diadems—drop—and Doges—surrender—
Soundless as dots—on a Disc of Snow—

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Emily Dickinson's search for new symbols of belief was as endless as the nibbling of old doubts was persistent. Being the kind of poet she was, she knew her best strategy was through the language of surprise, which might discover the meanings of her special religious experience. Once again she turned to the new scientific thought for effective terms to phrase her dilemma. For she was well aware that the supposed conflict between religion and science, which shook the Christian world at mid-century, dramatized the very real conflict between man's belief in immortality and his doubt of it. This split one of her best poems so irrevocably into two versions she could never decide which was her final choice. Written several years apart, they have identical first stanzas but reach opposing conclusions in the second. In all collections of her poetry until the recent variorum edition, her editors have combined them into one poem of three stanzas, on the plausible grounds that they are parts of a larger whole she happened never to construct. Though there is no real authority for this familiar arrangement, it is a convenient one for launching a commentary and is therefore adopted here.

At first reading this seems like a structurally simple poem, each stanza self-contained, each giving a separate thought about the dead: the peaceful last sleep of the faithful, their exclusion from the world of the living, the possibility that they are swallowed up in the vastness of eternity. The poet stands on the earth's surface and looks down into the grave, around her at life, then up into the starry heavens. Stanza one gives a religious view of death, with a confident belief in personal immortality; two, a humanist view of life in a world vibrant with sensations, but precariously enjoyed; three, a scientific view of cosmic peace achieved by extinction. But the several parts are intricately interrelated. At the beginning the possibility of immortal life is divorced from all wishful motivations, such as desire for reunion with the beloved, and made to stand on its own theological legs if it can. But this comes into conflict with the cold astronomical concept of eternity in the end. In between lies the poet's preference for the earth, signalized by the use of an exclamation point. Tension lines of irony, both within the stanzas and between them, complicate this simple structure by the strategy of verbal conflict.

The first stanza echoes the language of the Bible and of Protestant hymns, especially in the two long lines that establish with quiet assurance the coming Resurrection of the meek who lie 'Safe' in their 'Sleep'. But the short antiphonal lines undercut these orthodox affirmations of faith, by reminding that this is a cold white prison looking out the golden sunshine. As another poem proves, she could record with bleak accuracy the other worldliness of her Puritan ancestors whose longing for heaven was such as to make them spurn the joys of this life. But for herself she could not so easily renounce the Eden of this world. In the present poem her treatment of the Resurrection is more responsible. She achieves objectivity by concentrating on the frozen expectancy of the tombstone, and irony by implying the skeletons beneath in terms of what they are deprived of. The peace of the grave, in one sense, results from the loss of sentience.

The second stanza spells this out with novel effect, by a linguistic strategy similar to her use of hymnal conventions in the first. The ecstasy of life on this earth is rendered in the banal language of popular literature, the poetry of the gift books : laughing breeze, piping birds, and babbling bees. But a few deftly placed words puncture the sentiment that this 'Castle' can be man's permanent home. Its sunshine was excluded in the first stanza. Now its sounds fall on 'stolid' ears that are as 'ignorant' of the bird's song as it is of them. These two words are sharply juxtaposed with 'sagacity' in the final line, standing for both the wisdom of living beings and, from its root meaning, their quickness of sense perceptions. For sagacity has 'perished' amid the emblems of life, and the green-gold-and-blue world evoked by them has been extinguished in the whiteness of death. Such was the original version of the poem.

In the second version of the poem (the first and third stanzas as given above) a shattering question reverberates through the lines, especially if one bears in mind the 'Castle' of sunshine from the missing stanza. When sagacity has perished from this brightly coloured earth, will it dwell in the white houses of death or in white cosmic space, 'Alabaster Chambers' or a 'Disc of Snow'? Both alabaster and snow are images of peace, but also of immobility and coldness. From the point of view of this world, the radiant world of the omitted stanza, they imply deprivation. Both are reinforced by royal attributes, 'Satin' at the beginning and 'Diadems' at the end, but only the sunny castle of the first version has warmth and human appeal. Life at its meekest is simply buried in the ground. Life at its most pompous, tottering thrones and the collapse of the most glamorous symbol of republican power in modern times (Napolean's extinction of proud Venice), makes no impression on the blank cosmic immensity. On this earth, by implication, both had formerly shared the common glory of being alive.

Two clues in the final stanza, 'Crescent' and 'Disc', seem ample warrant for an astronomical interpretation of its imagery. When 'Diadems drop', Emily Dickinson says, the souls of the mighty dead disappear in interstellar space, 'Soundless as dots—on a Disc of Snow.' The Transcendental concept of death as the individual soul merging with the Oversoul was cheerless enough put in the abstract. In her poem, made concrete by an astronomical metaphor, it is chilling. By implication, the same destiny awaits the meek dead in stanza one. The small comfortable Puritan faith in a personal resurrection, with which the poem begins, is not pursued but simply allowed to hang in the air as a point from which to measure the cold immensity of infinite space and unending time, the comfortless view brought in by the new science. In his famous chapter on the meaning of whiteness, Melville had said of the Galaxy: 'Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way?' As man's concept of the universe has continued expanding into an endless series of universes, in a time-space relationship that is ungraspable by the average mind, this view has grown even bleaker. One of the distinguished philosophers of today, in an essay on modern man's shrunken capacity for worship, concludes that 'all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system.'

This is the direction towards which the poem moves. 'Science will not trust us with another World' was her explicit comment in a late letter. This does not mean that she, for her own part, trusted science on such a theme as immortality, any more than she could subscribe to the doctrine of a literal Resurrection. As a poet she felt no compunction to take sides between reason and faith. She merely used the conflicting ideologies of science and religion in her day as the materials for art, not to work out a philosophy. Here they furnish her with symbols, 'Alabaster Chambers' versus a 'Disc of Snow', that render a poetic meaning without arguing it. 'Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection' is thus the key line that gives tension to the whole poem. Rather, in terms of the actual state in which the *MSS* have survived, it provides the contrast in the first version between what is in the grave and what is outside, physical death waiting to be raised up to immortality and mortal life perishing. In the second version, it provides the contrast between, 'Safe' orthodox believers and lost modern man, though by one minute change in the opening stanza, 'Sleep' to 'Lie', she reduced the chances that they will ever wake to a new life. It is only by comparing the two poems that the final contrast is brought out, between the brief life of 'sagacity' on earth and the change that comes with death, whether Resurrection or extinction. That she never made up her mind between the two, or composed them into a single three-stanza poem, is indeed a disappointment.

Nevertheless, "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers", stands as one of Emily Dickinson's finest lyrics on the ambiguous relation of death and immortality. Neither the terror of death nor the assurance of immortality are presented here, only a sense of the sublimity and isolation that death imposes. The poem examines various attitudes on death and immortality : first, the consolations of faith and hope in resurrection; then the loss of animation and physical vigour; and finally, the fearful grandeur of the soul's new immortal existence. The key images contrast nature's vitality with the enclosed, alabaster condition of the dead and the slow, stately movement of eternity. From the assurances of conventional faith the poem moves to the enigmatic immortality attainable in the distant expanse of infinity.

A surface reading of the first stanza offers a confident assertion of orthodox resurrection, as the souls serenely await the Last Judgment and reunion with their glorified bodies. However, the adjective "Safe" links these elect to a smug, self-satisfied piousness. Mocked by the bright warmth of the morning and the vibrant sounds and activity of nature, these dead are truly untouched, deprived of life's vitality and denied sensation. Instead, they remain in alabaster perfection, encased in a precious white marble, frightening in its cold, translucent smoothness. Their graves are luxurious, spacious chambers, decorated with rafters of satin; but none of these frills conceal their lifeless, stone existence. Rather, the simple dignity of death shuns such ostentation. The image of the "meek members" openly satirizes the book of Revelation's account of the assembled elect and presents them as timid time-servers, whose goodness resulted from fears of damnation and society's pressures. Even the soft, plushy "m" sounds reflect this feeling. The singsong final lines suggest that their religious convictions are thin tinsel, a decorative coating which cannot conquer the stone reality of death. The second stanza presents another view of death, its terrible deprivation of physical vitality. Utilizing a series of cliches, the light laughter of the breeze, the babble of the bee, and the piping of the birds, it contrasts nature's careless freedom and idle happiness with the closed solemnity and "sagacity" of these cold dead

The final approach to immortality bypasses religion's assurances and nature's mindless energy to suggest the actual grandeur of death. Instead of personal identity or orthodox resurrection, immortality brings a cessation of pain and effort, an entrance into a vast, indifferent universe. The poem moves from the linear, closed images of the tomb into circular, expanding ones of crescents, scoops, and arcs, away from temporal limitations to the grandeur of years and worlds and finally into the firmament itself. The vastness of this eternal cycle dwarfs all other considerations and reveals the insignificance of the waiting meek followers and the childishness of nature's babbling. Eternity disdains temporal time and material existence. The final lines show death's levelling power and portray man's absorption into eternity as the insignificant dropping of a dot on a disc of snow. There is little religious consolation and no acknowledgment of personal immortality, for in death man mingles with nature's white and alien oversoul without personality or sensation. A numbed blankness suggests the superiority, even the majesty, of this ambiguous existence. In her poems on immortality, Emily Dickinson reveals not only her religious depth and perceptive insight into spiritual reality but also her artistic ability in employing both skepticism and faith as a strategy to increase the dramatic tension of her poems. Her final position is best understood by a letter she wrote to Judge Lord near the end of her life : "On subjects of which we know nothing...we both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble."

25

A Route of Evanescence

(First Published 1891)

Predman Krishen
M.A. (Pol. sc. Eco. Eng. His
Motiyar Rainawari
SRINAGER-1900[illegible]
KASHMIR

I. TEXT

A Route of Evanescence
With a revolving Wheel—
A Resonance of Emerald—
A Rush of Cochineal—

And every Blossom on the Bush
Adjusts its tumbled Head—
The Mail from Tunis, probably,
An easy Morning's Ride—

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Of all Emily Dickinson's bird poems there is only one that realizes the full potential magic in flash of colour and whir of wing, and it does so paradoxically by concentrating on their disappearance rather than their appearance. This is her famous eight-line snare for the humming-bird, set late in life.

Deservedly admired as a flawless lyric, it is also significant in relation to her theory of perception, being her most vivid rendering of the elusive, even perhaps illusory, quality of objects in nature. The first quatrain approaches a Japanese *haiku* in the conciseness of its notation and in its reduction of a natural phenomenon to a mental image. The aesthetic problem of imitation is raised at the outset by 'Evanescence', a word that in her day had not yet acquired the modern abstracted sense of fleeting or transitory, but held strictly to the root meaning of 'vanishing'. How can the artist represent a hummingbird if its flight is a 'disappearance from sight', as her Lexicon defines it, 'by removal to a distance'? She undoubtedly chose such an extreme example of elusive form in nature because of its dramatic value. But for her it also represented a general truth, as she phrased it in a letter of the same period : 'All we secure of Beauty is its Evanescences.' This miracle is then rendered in terms of motion, sound, and colour intricately woven into an image pattern by synaesthesia. To begin with, the outline of the bird's figure is replaced by its disappearing path across the field of vision. The visual effect is the converse of the photographic one of multiple rapid exposures of a moving object on a single plate. Her first line records not the simultaneous presence but the simultaneous vanishing of the bird at every point. The second, even in the phrasing given above, 'With a revolving wheel', helps to complicate this effect because it does not describe the actuality of vibrating wings so much as the optical illusion created by them. Better still, a rough pencil draft offers a fascinating series of variants: 'With a delusive, dissolving, dissembling, renewing wheel.' Almost any of these would have been more pertinent to her purpose, especially 'dissolving' which would have turned the motion of the whirling wheel into a trick of prestidigitation, the bird vanishing before astonished eyes.

'A Resonance of Emerald' transmutes the humming sound by sympathetic vibration into iridescent colour. Lest this be thought extravagant, one can quote from the normally sober *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in the edition available to her. There the great zoologist Alfred Newton, in his article on the hummingbird, declared that 'ornithologists have been compelled to adopt the vocabulary of the jeweller in order to give an idea of the indescribable radiance of its plumage.' Dickinson's ecstasy was shared by contemporary scientists, though the use of synaesthesia to make the music become visible in the emerald sheen of wings and back is her own effective contribution. Again she showed her originality by avoiding such a hackneyed image as 'ruby throat' and writing instead, 'A Rush of Cochineal'. No jewel offered quite the brilliance of this rare pigment used since ancient times to make especially vivid reds, like crimson and scarlet. To see this spot on the hummingbird's throat, the poet-spectator-reader must take the stance of the flowers themselves. Then, as colour is transformed into a rushing assault, the miracle of the hummingbird vanishes in a blinding flash of cochineal.

After the mounting tension of her brilliant notations of colour, sound, and motion, in the first stanza, the poetess relaxes for two lines, in which the hummingbird is conspicuous by his absence, in order to catch her breath before launching the daring image of her conclusion. 'The mail from Tunis', when connected with the idea of 'resonance' and 'revolving' wheels, may suggest the speed with which sound and light are dispersed through space. 'Tunis' was infinitely remote to her, and an 'easy Morning's Ride' from there could only have been achieved on a magic carpet. Yet from this exotic place at such incredible speed comes the commonplace daily 'mail', the familiar figure of the postman on his 'Route' jostling the wonder of it all.

Emily may well have found the suggestion for her image in a passage from *The Tempest*: The Queen of Tunis, who dwelt 'Ten leagues beyond man's life', could not possibly get letters from Naples 'unless the sun were post'. For the reader intimate with Shakespeare, as she assuredly was, this sidelong allusion may extend the poem's meaning far beyond the specific lines of the source. It brings to mind the figure of Prospero gazing in wonder at the elusive beauty of this green earth, and the more shimmering beauty of the unseen world within which the poet can create by invoking his muse Ariel. As she developed her theory of perception, she gradually came to believe, as the twentieth-century scientist does also, that objects in nature cannot be literally grasped by the senses or reproduced by mimetic skill. She does not pretend to offer a real hummingbird snared from the external world but a poetic hummingbird, the perception of one in the garden of the brain. 'All we secure of Beauty is its Evanescences.' Bird or poem ? Her own flights from Tunis, the packets of extraordinary poems left in manuscript, she described elsewhere as her 'Letter to the World.'

The focal image of the poem is a ruby-throated humming-bird in flight. The astonishing rapidity of the bird's movement justifies the phrase "A route of evanescence." This is a metonymy equating the bird with its own path across the field of vision. The visual effect is the converse of that obtained photographically by multiple rapid-exposures of a moving object on a single plate ; here the poet describes not the simultaneous presence but the simultaneous vanishing of the bird at every point. The "revolving wheel" is of course the whirring blur of its wings, with whose peculiar drone, by synaesthesia, the iridescent colour of the humming-birds' head and back is blended— "A resonance of emerald." The brilliant red of its throat (a colouring, incidentally, found only in the male) is the flash of cochineal as the bird rushes past. This line and the preceding one contain a vivid onomatopoeia. Darting and hovering then, the humming-bird dishevels the petals of the flowers, so that they must bob up to recover their poise which the flurry has shaken.

In the final two lines the imagery is varied through the metaphors of "mail", which compel a second interpretation of the earlier part. Beyond the image of the humming-bird is implicit that of a speeding railway train, the mail and express, and also that of the more common kind of mail—a letter. It is this which provides the perhaps wistful irony of the concluding line. A train travels upon a "route", it is borne along by many a "revolving wheel", its sound is a "resonance" and a "rush", and on it people "ride". These words thus have a double value : they remind us that like the humming-bird itself, a railway train gives a look at the far places of the earth—for those who journey with it. But the bird as passenger train is also an ironic impossibility ; no train crosses the sea from Tunis, and no "easy morning's ride" will take us there. The humming-bird is an envoy of curious lands ("Tunis"), of tropic colour ("cochineal"), of oriental opulence ("emerald"). These particular images transform the bird into remoteness invading the familiar garden, which they contrast with their own splendours. The humming-bird, in point of fact, is not a trans-Atlantic migrant, but cochineal was and perhaps still is associated with North Africa. The gleam of green and ruby is moreover, as is clear enough, a message, a letter, from a distant country. It is only in one direction that, for the poet herself, this message can fly ; the train, however ironically, suggests what the bird cannot, that if one could, oneself might go.

But, again, the way is "A route of evanescence", a route that has vanished. Because Emily Dickinson's own situation was always so crucial to her poems as she created them, it may be not unjust to refer this poem to it. Both the train and the letter were doubtless obsessions ; they appear, of course, elsewhere in her work. It is right indeed that here the train should be so obviously inadequate to the dream. Quite probably the best symbol she could find for herself was the flowers with tumbled, or humbled, heads, greeting with alarm, though not without humour, the disconcerting stranger. So too, in expectation of a letter, she must often have adjusted her tumbled hair before answering the postman's morning knock.

26

A Bird Came Down the Walk

(First Published 1891)

I. TEXT

A Bird came down the Walk—
He did not know I saw—
He bit an Angleworm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw,

And then he drank a Dew
From a convenient Grass—
And then hopped sidewise to the Wall
To let a Beetle pass—

He glanced with rapid eyes
That hurried all around—
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought—
He stirred his Velvet Head

Like one in danger, Cautious,
I offered him a Crumb
And he unrolled his feathers
And rowed him softer home—

Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam—
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon
Leap, plashless as they swim.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The elusiveness of natural forms can be shown most vividly when they are in rapid motion. If this is pre-eminently true of the humming-bird it is nonetheless true of all winged things. Once she dramatized the idea of evanescence for birds in general, using the domestic setting of a garden to suggest the possibility of rapprochement, then touching the spring of difference to separate the two worlds suddenly and irrevocably, as is evident in this poem. What undercuts the make-believe of friendliness in the first part of the poem is the casually dropped second line, 'He did not know I saw'. As long as the poet is unobserved, the life of nature goes on with such spontaneous informality as to give her some hope of participating in it. But the clues showing this to be an alien world are planted thick.

The bird's dinner is a worm, eaten 'raw', an attribute set off in commas for emphasis : the human being cooks his meat and sticks to vertebrates, in general. Stanza two excludes her from the scene more effectually still by introducing an ingenious bit of grammatical magic. 'Dew' and 'grass' are too small for man to take cognizance of except in the plural sense ; but by the unorthodox addition of an article to make the collective nouns singular she keeps the whole garden world reduced to the bird's size. The poet is left towering above and outside, having no magical elixir like Alice in Wonderland to shrink her to a level where communication is possible. So after washing down his repast with 'a Dew' the bird continues his 'walk', recognizing his fellow the beetle with a show of courtesy, still unaware of the human intruder. As she stoops to join in, the bird's eyes become 'frightened Beads'. According to folk wisdom the surest sign of recognition between human beings, when speech and gesture are withheld, is the expressiveness of the eyes ; only in death or a state of extreme fright would they be described as glassy. But those of the bird are always beady, and now as he senses danger they glaze with fear.

'I offered him a Crumb.' With this first movement on the part of the spectator the game of friendly relations is up. The fantasy of the last six lines is in striking contrast to the miniature scene and slow action of the first three stanzas. Only by extravagant language could she render the speed and distance of his removal. The wing motion is that of oars rowing through the seamless ether, to take him 'home'. How remote that is from the home of the poet, to which she now presumably returns with her unpartaken crumb, she illustrates by the even more fanciful figure of butterflies swimming 'off Banks of Noon.' All winged things seemed to her to live in another world, as she said elsewhere of the butterfly, who vanishes 'To Nowhere...in purposeless Circumference.' Again she wrote : 'High from the earth I heard a bird' ; baffled in her attempt to follow his flight or understand his behaviour, she could only come up with the prosaic conclusion : 'How different we are !' Her failure to establish relations with the one in her garden dramatizes this difference.

In her best nature poems Emily Dickinson skilfully deepens her concrete detail and sensuous surface imagery by contrasting the world of man with that of nature. "A Bird came down the Walk" can be read literally as an exact description of the quick, furtive movements of a bird as it eats, hops about a garden, and then flies gracefully away. The surface tone is humorous and wryly ironic, for she laughs at the bird's fear of a beetle and his distrust of the crumb she offers. By the final stanza the tone is one of awe and aesthetic response to the bird's beautiful flight. Yet various undercurrents of fear demand that we read deeper into the poem, for the bird's initial casualness changes into hesitancy and suspicion. Even the description of the bird eating the worm occasions uneasy humour.

The stanza's quick trimeter lines, varied by one tetrameter, are reined by a regular iambic beat and exact rhyme. At his first appearance the bird is humorously pictured on a casual afternoon stroll. His eating the worm is a natural act, but the precise description of the bite and the rhyme emphasis given to "raw" stress the unpleasant aspects of the meal, jolting the accustomed picture of a bird's harmlessness. The next stanza whimsically continues the meal with the play on the word "grass" and the incongruity of drinking a dew. The sudden appearance of the beetle subtly shifts the tone as the bird's surface courtesy conceals the underlying struggle among nature's creatures.

The slight changes in meter, the use of run-on lines, and the approximate rhymes in stanzas three and four break the exact pattern of the opening and intensify the mood of fear and danger. The bird's eyes are rapid and hurried, like 'frightened Beads' rolling wildly in a glass. As the bird stirs his velvet head, the poet reveals herself and offers a crumb. The irony in attempting to placate the bird's fears is evident, since nature has already supplied sufficient food for the bird. The capitalization of "crumb" and its end-rhyme position further accentuate the lack of understanding between man and nature. The final lines in the poem fully present this separation by describing the bird's serene flight. The assonance of "o" and "a", the blending of "p" and "l" sounds, and the conceit of the sky-sea and bird-boat develop the feeling of eternal serenity. In particular the final lines portray a world of aesthetic perfection, where fragile, varicoloured butterflies leap gracefully off the sun's hot sands into the liquid coolness of the sky.

Drawing the poem's various strands together, one sees how skilfully Emily has moved beyond mere physical description. Basically the poem considers the ambivalence of nature's beauty and grace having such a destructive core. Beneath its tranquil surface exists a world of fear and continual warfare. Yet, nature effortlessly combines these disperate traits as the bird, which ferociously eats the worm, also achieves aesthetic immortality in its flight. Man's spying and his useless offer of a crumb lead to the bird's final rejection and illuminate another theme : nature's superior self-sufficiency over man's fumbling awkwardness.

27

Before I Got My Eye Put Out

(First Published 1891)

I. TEXT

Before I got my eye put out
I liked as well to see—
As other Creatures, that have Eyes
And know no other way—

But were it told to me—Today—
That I might have the sky
For mine—I tell you that my Heart
would split, for size of me—

The Meadows—mine—
The Mountains—mine—
All Forests—Stintless Stars—
As much of Noon as I could take
Between my finite eyes—

The Motions of the Dipping Birds--
The Morning's Amber Road—
For mine—to look at when I liked—
The News would strike me dead—

So safer—guess—with just my soul
Upon the Window pane—
Where other Creatures put their eyes—
Incautious—of the Sun—

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

In this poem the poet has contrasted the different types of experience provided by physical and spiritual vision. Spiritual vision is the surest and the safest guide to the enjoyment of the beauties of the world and nature. Physical vision can never fully comprehend the over-dazzling beauty of nature and runs the danger of losing its very existence.

The poet says that before she got the light of her eyes extinguished, she liked to enjoy the sights of nature's beauty in the same way and to the same degree as other creatures gifted with eyesight did. At that time no other avenues of experience were open to her. She did not know any other way of comprehending the universe :

> Before I got my eye put out
> I liked as well to see—
> As other Creatures, that have Eyes
> And know no other way—

But then a richer realization came to her :

> But were it told to me—Today—
> That I might have the sky
> For mine—I tell you that my Heart
> Would split, for size of me—

Her eyes were put out by the Sun, by her degreeless Noon, by her sudden intuition of a truth so overpowering it shattered her physical sense and replaced that dull way of seeing Nature, that ordinary way ignorant creatures must content themselves with, replaced conventional sight with spiritual vision. When she became aware that all this world of transient nature was not merely to observe but might be possessed, was actually a boon for her taking, that news was too much for her ; she was too humble, felt too small and perhaps even fearful of such vision. Moreover, to possess it "Today" meant dying today. She preferred to leave it at guess, not certainty. She preferred not yet to die, to leave her soul gazing through the crystal window pane.

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28

Hope is the Thing With Feathers

(First Published 1891)

I. TEXT

"Hope" is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all—

And sweetest—in the Gale—is heard—
And sore must be the storm—
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm—

I've heard it in the chillest land—
And on the strangest Sea—
Yet, never, in Extremity,
It asked a crumb—of Me.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Emily Dickinson in this lovely little lyric has beautifully poetised Pope's well known dictum, "Hope springs eternal in the human breast." She compares hope to a bird that pours its melody into the farthest reaches of human soul. Hope is indeed a sweet-singing bird that sits on a twig of the soul which branches out into the vast expanses of eternity. The wordless melody of this bird echoes in the soul of man breaking all barriers of time and space. Time stands still when this magic-feathered thing sends down the vibrations of her melting notes into the still depths of human soul. The torch of hope burns bright forever and lights up the darkest corridors of human soul. The bird of hope doesn't twitter in words; her miraculous tune carries the entire burden of her meaningful message. New horizons and new frontiers envisioned by hope in her melodious dreams open out in their brightest colours to greet her enchanting harmonies that float on the mighty ocean of the sweetest melody.

The deathless music of the bird of hope sounds sweetest when the tempestuous storm of sorrow rages in the human soul. The stormy winds of pain only add to the sweetness of hope's enchanting music. The storm of misery would indeed be very bitter and terrible if it frightened the little bird of hope that always kept the heart of man warm. The bird of hope may be small, but it can face the great gales of grief with gay cheerfulness. Only a storm of severe tragic intensity could terrify this brave bird of bubbling energy out of her confident serenity.

The poetess concludes her lyric by remembering the music of the bird which still echoes in her soul. She heard the music of the bird even when her soul was in the grip of cold and chilly fears, even when the boat of her soul was left adrift on the unknown seas of lurking dangers. The immortal strains of the cheerful bird could not be stilled even by the chilly fears of the unknown dangers hidden in the depths of the strange seas. But whatever the circumstances the bird never demanded even a small crumb from her. Even in the midst of extreme hardship the bird of hope didn't ask for anything. It means that hope is ever self-generating and self-sustaining.

29

This is My Letter to the World

(First Published 1890)

I. TEXT

This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me—
The simple News that Nature told—
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see—
For love of Her—Sweet—countryman—
Judge tenderly—of Me

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The question of why Emily Dickinson wrote is best answered by asking why she lived and experienced all areas of life so intensely. In a sense her poetry preserved her individuality and provided the needed release for yearnings that threatened her balance. With a daring skill she transformed personal losses into imperishable lyrics of self-exploration. Her isolation and suffering developed in her a habit of introspection and a fascination with the hidden areas of the soul. Rather than escape life, she fronted it on the most trying battleground—in her own spirit—and mastered it through her art. In more ways than one her poetry was her triumphant "letter to the World/ That never wrote to Me."

Emily Dickinson seems instinctively and audaciously to have established her own poetic manifesto, as well as to have foreshadowed the immortality she sought, in these famous lines :

This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me—
The simple News that Nature told—
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see—
For love of Her—Sweet—countrymen—
Judge tenderly—of Me

Although the poem has been much quoted and has, in fact, been evaluated as important or even pivotal to Dickinson's art, emphasis has not been placed where it would surely seem to belong ; special attention has not, in short, been accorded to the role of the audience in the poet's characteristic concerns and in her art. Yet in this poem, perhaps, more clearly than in any other poem, Emily Dickinson signifies her audience, names it as "the World" and even indicates the single most important characteristic of that wider audience which accounts for much r'at is enigmatic in the poet's own work. In a line of great moment, she writes quite simply, even flatly, that it is to be of audiences the most frustrating, the most difficult and paradoxically the most demanding : it is to be the audience "who never wrote to me".

Emily regards herself as a messenger of the "News of Nature" and her poetry is a record of that message. The message is intended for future generations ("Hands I cannot see"), yet she appeals to her co...trymen to consider her and her poetry sympathetically.

30

The Soul Selects Her Own Society

(First Published 1890)

I. TEXT

The Soul selects her own Society—
Then—shuts the Door—
To her divine Majority—
Present no more—

Unmoved—she notes the Chariots—pausing—
At her low Gate—
Unmoved—an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat—

I've known her—from an ample nation—
Choose One—
Then—close the Valves of her attention—
Like Stone—

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Emily Dickinson's fastidiousness is set forth on many occasions, though never with greater elegance than in the present poem.

It is possible that this poem has some relation to her choice of a life of seclusion made about this time (1862), preferring her own small circle and closing the door on the general world, as the opening lines suggest. But the select 'Society' of the first stanza seems specifically limited to the chosen 'One' of the third. It is also possible to identify this One as muse rather than lover. In the poems of this period there is certainly some fusion of three great events in her life that seem to have taken place simultaneously: withdrawal into solitude and dedication both to poetry and to the image of a beloved.

A surface reading of the poem seems to make this quite simply an affair of the heart. The central stanza weights the meaning in that direction, for the pausing 'Chariots' and kneeling 'Emperor' certainly suggest future suitors being rejected because of the chosen One, rather than the lures of society that might distract her from her art. On the other hand this 'One' may be God, as suggested by the capitalization and by the fact that her choice is possible only at spiritual maturity ('divine Majority'); finally, there is the hint of a nunnery ('Mat') where she waits for Him alone, the king of Heaven surely taking precedence over mere mortal emperors. Whether her devotion is to an earthly or a heavenly lover, she is 'unmoved' by the petitions of all others, closing the 'Valves of her attention' to them. The organic 'Valves' in this climactic image make the exclusion more vital than the variant 'lids' in the manuscript, mechanical doors that shut out further vision by voluntary effort. With their anatomical reference, as in those arterial valves devoted to the single function of the heart, they suggest the instinctive closing off of communication in all directions except the life-giving one. To all others she turns a heart of 'Stone', the shock word that makes her choice final.

A deeper reading of the poem, however, would reveal that it is not about love or friendship. It has to do, rather, with the spiritualization of the total self. In other words, what the Soul chooses is not another person ; she selects and takes dominion over all the other aspects of the speaker's identity. These are subordinated to a rigorous inner discipline, with the result that external circumstances, no matter how grand or ostentatious, come to seem meaningless. As the terms indicate, the waiting *Chariots* and the *kneeling Emperor* belong to the secular world, and, in particular, to the pomp and pageantry of life. They can have no appeal for a speaker who has been claimed and refined by spirituality. If the world is here to commune with the speaker, it discovers that she worships only at an inward shrine. She and the Soul have compacted into a *Society* of one, a union which admits to no distractions and no outsiders.

Underlying the entire drama is the conception of the Soul as Queen, Her regal qualities are suggested by the term *divine Majority*, and by the way in which representatives from the world without are made to *present* themselves (as at court) for her favour. The air of royalty is further attested to by such marks of complete self-sufficiency as the key verbs in the poem : *selects, Unmoved, Choose*. The Soul's majestic carriage is summed up in the specific actions she takes : in her summoning 'one' subject from an 'ample nation' ; in the firmness with which she 'shuts the Door' ; in her decision to 'close the Valves of her attention'. The upshot is that we see the spiritual self as girded with a kind of power that is indeed a rarity in Emily Dickinson's writing. By contrast to the responsive body or the shaken mind, the Soul steps forth here as a model of condescension, a truly magnificent figure, who has been cloaked in the trappings of a splendid, stony aloofness. With the Soul's capacity to accept and reject at will, we seem to have come, at long last, upon a part of the human identity that will feel neither pain nor frustration and upon whom there can impinge none of the usual pressures that afflict and determine human existence.

Yet in Emily Dickinson's scheme, not even the Soul is free from life's tragic paradoxes. The retirement of this queenly being into herself is also the basis for her eventual exposure to destitution and disappointment. The apparent security of the Soul only means that her serenity can be challenged, just as her preference for isolation becomes the mark of her unique vulnerability. And precisely because the Soul is the purest and noblest aspect of the self, she is likewise the aspect to be most deeply hurt by impurity, and the one soonest reduced to a shambles by the appearance of anything in her surroundings which implies the ignoble. Hence, while the imperial decrees of "The soul selects" are still echoing, it is next necessary for us to turn to some darker chapters in the history of the spiritual self. We need to see that for all her seeming tranquillity, the Soul continues to feel unsatisfied needs—and that for all her seeming superiority, she occupies a cloister that is fearfully liable to invasion.

If the Soul in "The soul selects" is thought of as a theological or religious being—and certainly her renunciation of the secular would seem to warrant that interpretation—then it is in no way unjust to the poem to suggest that certain basic questions have been left unresolved. Granted that the Soul can turn her back on the mundane, what does she then contemplate? After the valves of her attention have shut out life, what is left for her to focus upon? Emily Dick'nson would like to assume that the answer is God. God alone would be a suitable companion to the Soul, a King fit for her Queenliness.

31

Essential Oils Are Wrung

(First Published 1891)

I. TEXT

Essential Oils—are wrung –
The Attar from the Rose
Be not expressed by Suns—alone—
It is the gift of Screws—

The General Rose—decay—
But this—in Lady's Drawer
Make Summer—When the Lady lie
In Ceaseless Rosemary—

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Emily Dickinson was confidently articulate about the psychic pressures that compelled her to poetic expression. Through an apt metaphor she rendered her conviction in remarkably compact form. The flower image buried at the heart of this poem was valuable to her because of the tradition she could count on to enrich her meaning without employing it derivatively. The Rose as symbol for the transiency of life, a favourite of poets because of its obvious beauty and fragility, had filled the preceding century with popular lyrics. She was skilful in evading the hackneyed, even while exploiting it as part of her poetic strategy. The whole convention of mutability is brought into play with a single line, "The General Rose decay", but this is not her theme. Instead, what can be salvaged from death's decay and how it is transmuted into a new life.

Flowers are everywhere in her poetry and letters, representing life at its fullest glory. For her the perfection of flowers was the damask rose, but in spite of several attempts she could not embody her favourite in a successful poem as the direct theme. Yet the essence of this perfection furnished her a striking metaphor of the perfume of life, so adequately sustained throughout the present poem that she did not need to violate the unity of her conceit by explicit reference to her real subject, how poetry is extracted from experience. The modern Webster Dictionary defines 'essence', in its philosophical sense, as the inward nature of anything, underlying its manifestations. The edition of a century ago carried this one step further by citing Locke's distinction between nominal and real essence, the latter being 'that which makes anything to be what it is' though unknowable to the senses. And as applied to perfumes, those qualities or virtues refined from grosser matter, her Lexicon was even more helpful by calling them 'essential oils'. This provided the opening words of her poem, a sensuous image embodying the Platonic idea of essence in the rich condensation suggested by oil—superimposed on the common meaning of 'essential' as indispensable.

The second line goes on to specify this as attar of roses, one of the most costly ingredients of perfume, described in her Webster in terms of its exotic origin : 'A highly fragrant concrete obtained in India from the petals of roses'. India was a loaded word for her, typifying opulence in awesome degree, and this is certainly included in her meaning here. To a young friend getting married she sent her congratulations 'that the shortest route to India has been supremely found,' and in a poem on her own moment of love she defines it in the concluding line as 'My drop of India'. These refer to the ecstasy of love, but since she frequently equates love with poetry it becomes clear that for her India, brought into this poem by 'Attar from the Rose', is symbolic of the heaven-on-earth that includes them both.

The process of making perfume is rendered with precision in twenty words (the first four lines), several of which work equally well both ways, illustrating the process of creating poetry by subtle indirection. Poetry and perfume are not natural products 'expressed by Suns alone'. They are manufactured by man's cunning artifice. This is at the opposite pole from the theory of composition of the Transcendentalists. Emerson epitomized this concept of organicism by declaring that poems should grow like corn or melons in the sun, and Whitman boasted that he put the theory into practice. Dickinson was nearer to Poe in her emphasis on craftsmanship, but nearer to the moderns in her theory of language as the instrument by which the essential oils of poetry are 'expressed'.

This word fits perfume-making exactly in its root meaning and poetry in its derived sense, to represent in words or symbolize in art. Just as the presses used on flower petals are operated by 'screws', so the powerful forces that produce the extract called poetry are those that operate on the poet to turn the stuff of life into enduring art. There is a fine irony in her use of the word gift ! It functions not only in its simple sense of a present, but in its figurative meaning of "an endowment conferred by the Author of our nature", according to her Lexicon. Taken straight this would support the loose romanticism of her predecessors in applying the term 'gifted' to poets, but she gives it an unexpected turn. By the shock of juxtaposition, 'It is the *gift* of *screws*,' she adds to the requirement of innate genius the felt pressures of experience and the technical disciplines self-imposed by the artist.

The second half of the poem seems to veer off on a new theme, the re-creative power possessed by the thing thus created, the life of art that goes on beyond the death of the artist. But with her the immortality of poetry is frequently a complementary idea to the process of creation, and in this poem the two parts are firmly knit by the perfume metaphor which is dominant to the end. Perhaps it was her desire to emphasize the absolute truth of what she was saying that led her to the puzzling verb forms employed here, 'decay', 'make', 'lie'. Her usage is certainly idiosyncratic, but one may conjecture a purpose that fits with the general intention of this poem. By omitting the final *s* she was trying to get down to the basic stem of the verbs, their pure uninflected verbal quality, paring away number, mood, and even the partial limitation in time implied by the present tense. By this ruse she was seeking to escape from all particularity—of quantity, quality, even calendar—into the Absolute : rose decay, just as poet die, but perfume make summer.

One other personal reference need not remain conjectural. The attar of roses, appropriately laid away in the lady's drawer, refers to the manuscripts of this private poet preserved in a similar way. Taken out by her, both perfume and poems, their fragrance can recall the life that has been compressed into them, odour being the psychological key to remembrance. Even when poet and rose are long dead this fragrance remains with power to 'make summer' again, and summer for her is emblematic of life. It is art that *makes* life'. This was the passionate statement of belief by Henry James at the height of his career, and she shared with his this belief in its creative power.

The perfume of poetry recreates the calendar summer, which itself has created the rose of life, out of which perfume and poetry were first expressed. By contrast the rose-life, now decayed, lies in 'Spiceless Sepulchre,' not being an essential oil. The final line is especially felicitous and saves the poem from the near-disaster of a variant conclusion, 'In Ceaseless Rosemary,' which would have introduced a sentimental note and an alien theme, distracting attention from the immortality of poetry to that of the poet. Much more appropriately, the fragrance has left the body to be transmuted into spirit, and the process has been brought full circle. By implication one more unifying structure can be adduced. As mortality is enclosed in the tomb and perfume in its phial, so the poet's meaning is contained in the form of the poem. Because of the particular perfume chosen, this can be pushed one step further. Attar of roses, as a 'fragrant concrete', needs no outside container. Content and form are one and the same, inseparable as in the perfect poem.

The central idea of the poem may be summed up thus. The essence of an experience, the universal insight that the poet tries to express, is not obtained merely by being attuned to nature's processes or by slow organic growth ; rather, poetic creation is a difficult task, depending more on the artist than on inspiration. As she imaginatively phrased it, only an unbearable stress could extract the precious essence. The second stanza broadens this concept and affirms the triumph of the artist whose fragrant creation will far outlast the corruptible rose and even the mortal artist.

32

To Hear an Oriole Sing

(First Published 1891)

I. TEXT

To hear an Oriole sing
May be a common thing—
Or only a divine.

It is not of the Bird
Who sings the same, unheard,
As unto Crowd—

The Fashion of the Ear
Attireth that it hear
In Dun, or fair—

So whether it be Rune,
Or whether it be none
Is of within.

The "Tune is in the Tree—"
The Skeptic—showeth me—
"No Sir ! In Thee !"

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Emily Dickinson believed that the perception of a song depended on the ability of the listener to hear ; his judgment had nothing to do with the song. This is obvious from a reading of this poem. There is a certain irony in the insertion of 'only' in line three, emphasized by the necessity of an extra foot. It would normally attach to 'a common thing', and the displacement that attaches it to 'divine' makes this a sort of pyrrhic victory for the skeptic, who is scornful of Ideal reality. Again, a word of comment seems needed for the last words used to characterize the tune, whether it be Rune or none. 'Rune' means not only a mysterious or magical symbol, but also any poem or song ; and the manuscript offers 'din' as a variant for 'none'. This brings them in line with the paired adjectives in the first and third stanzas. So whether it be song or mere sound, 'fair' or 'dun', 'divine' or 'common', depends entirely on the ear that hears it. She refuses the gambit that pragmatists have shown to be a contrived dilemma by adroitly dodging the strict argument of idealism versus materialism. That is, she does not deny that the bird is in tree, nor does she say that the sound waves have to be heard in order to exist ; these are simply objective things that go on out there, separated from man and graspless by him. Her subject is not the singing but the hearing, 'To *hear* an Oriole sing.' It is perception that makes it a 'Tune', gives it meaning, and this is wholly subjective. So the skeptical ornithologist is out on a limb when he insists that the *tune* is in the tree. 'Skeptic' is used here, not in the philosophical sense of one who doubts the real existence of the objective world, but in the opposite commonsense meaning of one who does not believe without proof of the senses.

Of Bronze and Blaze

(First Published 1896)

I. TEXT

Of Bronze—and Blaze—
The North—Tonight—
So adequate—it forms—
So preconcerted with itself—
So distant—to alarms—
An Unconcern so sovereign

To Universe, or me—
Infects my simple spirit
With Taints of Majesty—
Till I take vaster attitudes—
And strut upon my stem—
Disdaining Men, and Oxygen,
For Arrogance of them—

My Splendours, are Menagerie—
But their competeless Show
Will entertain the Centuries
When I, am long ago,
An Island in dishonoured Grass—
Whom none but Beetles—know.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

More than most of her contemporaries, Emily Dickinson held in firm control the temptation to storm heaven's gate and insisted on making the distinction between heavenly beauty and that which the poet can create. Her finest poem on this theme, "Of Bronze and Blaze" is achieved by a striking contrast between the splendour of the aurora borealis and the lowly 'menagerie' to which the mortal poet is limited.

In this poem, there can be no doubt that the first section is a celebration of divine beauty, made even more effective by being couched in terms of a cosmic aesthetic. It is doubly appropriate for her theme by being apparently created right before her eyes. The unfolding pattern of rays and corona is rendered organically in the second line, 'So adequate it forms'. In her Lexicon 'adequately' had not acquired the diminished connotation of today, but retained the full root meaning of 'in exact proportion', an attribute that can only attach to God. In contrast with such infinite fullness of expansion and infinite simplicity of principle, she, in her human incompleteness and fragmentation, is by implication inadequate. When she adds that it is 'preconcerted with itself' she is Latinist enough to know that this means a pre-established harmony and accord. The poet, on the other hand, is disconcerted both with herself and with the heavenly beauty she sees.

The fourth line, 'So distant to alarms', needs some elucidation. Elsewhere she speaks of the moon as untroubled by the problems that harass men—life, death, and the concern over immortality—but instead 'engrossed to Absolute/ With shining' ; and of birds singing at dawn not for applause but for an ecstasy 'independent...Of Deity and Men.' If this is true of the more commonplace manifestations of natural beauty, it is even more so of the aurora which displays itself with a sovereign 'unconcern' towards the universe as well as towards her. Its apparent motion outward from irradiating centre to full circumference is only illusion, the symbol of unity-in-multiplicity taking form before mortal eyes. For it is actually motionless in time and space, the parts and the whole existing from eternity to eternity in equal correspondence ('adequate' from *adaequatus*), at peace in its self-sufficiency. 'Alarms' and fretful motions belong to the human not the celestial sphere, especially as she reaches up towards the divine circle she feels desperately concerned to imitate. This is the face of God shining through, the perfection of beauty unconscious of itself. This would be a model for the ideal organic art of the poet dreamed of by the Transcendentalists.

The second section of the poem comes to grips with this very possibility : Can man create such beauty ? It is included as part of the same stanza because it is an answering half of the same theme and is even linked syntactically, being a predication of which the first six lines are a loosely formed but complex subject—the sheer substantive Being of heavenly beauty. Another device heightens the contrast between the two sections. In the line expressing the aurora's unconcern "To Universe, or me" the unorthodox comma makes the addition of herself seem like an afterthought, so insignificant is she by comparison. But this comes exactly at the point where the focus of interest shifts from the heavenly to the earthly creator of beauty. The hymbly added 'or me' is gradually replaced with 'Till I take vaster attitudes —' And strut...' The poet and her poems, becomes the real subject throughout the rest of the poem.

As the human creator is tempted to rival the divine, even the grand scale diction is echoed. For 'adequate', preconcerted', 'sovereign', in the first half there are 'spirit', 'vaster', and 'majesty' in the second, but the latter are always used in a shrunken or mocking context. Her use of scientific terms, her usual strategy when opposing doubt to faith, is significant ; and since she is concerned here with the very life of poetry, they were drawn appropriately from medical science.

The mortal poet corrupts his true nature if he attempts to be divine, and the infection may prove fatal if it leads him to disdain 'Oxygen'. He may indeed have a 'spirit' but it is a simple one that should not aspire to 'majesty', at least in the heavenly sense ; and 'simple' suggests not only humility but Naivete, to the point of becoming a foolish poseur. It is not the gods but pretentious mortals who strike 'attitudes' and 'strut'. Both are theatrical words, and the latter has the added fault of pride. Controlled by the context of 'simple' and 'stem', 'strut' dramatizes the absurdity of such posturing. It is meant in the etymological sense, to project upward, but as she stretches her neck towards the circumference she loses contact with the centre. 'Disdain' and 'arrogance' have been applied to those at the top of the hierarchy, but they are appellations of snobbery rather than nobility. The poet must remain earth-bound. He is tied to his fellow men by the bonds of humanity, to the air which he breathes for his very life, and by his stem to the earth where his roots are. He cannot be a 'Stemless Flower' like the moon. To ape the divine power that creates the aurora borealis is to lose his proper status and function.

These earthly clues form the structural links with the third section of her poem and prepare for the surprising announcement of the poet's true province : 'My Splendours are Menagerie'. In this context 'menagerie' is bizarre to say the least, and her meaning is somewhat enigmatic. 'Menagerie' was a current term for the small travelling circus of her day, usually consisting chiefly of animals, hence a carnival. Perhaps the Bible will lead closer to her intention for Noah's Ark, the first menagerie, included not only animals and plants but the human species, everything indeed but spiritual entities. This emphasizes the meanings of variety and multiplicity as opposed to the simple splendour of the aurora, whose forms and colours though multiple are unified in a preconcerted harmony. 'Menagerie' was a grotesque word, deliberately chosen for dramatic contrast with the celestial world beyond her reach. It was her all-inclusive word for the things and thoughts of this earth, the proper subject matter of the poet.

Even so, she boasts that such poems are in their own way 'Splendours', and they will 'entertain the Centuries'. It is notable that their function is beauty and pleasure, not moral instruction. These lines reach back to the beginning of the poem for final parallels and differences. 'Splendours' from the Latin *splendere* meaning to shine, keeps up the image of the aurora's 'Blaze'. Further, she must have read in her Lexicon of the northern lights : 'They serve to illuminate the earth and cheer the gloom of long winter nights', especially in the higher latitudes where they are called the 'merry dancers'. These auroral splendours, she infers, will entertain eternity. Her own are not in competition with them, nor even with other mortal creators of beauty since she was a private poet. Her bid for the immortality of her 'Competeless Show' is not immodest by comparison, for she measures it by calendar time, 'Centuries'. 'After a hundred years', she once wrote of a deserted graveyard, 'Nobody knows the Place' ; strangers listlessly spell out the 'lone Orthography' of the forgotten dead. Similarly with her in the present poem, when she has been for a century or so "An Island in dishonoured Grass", a neglected mound with its unremembered marker. But the poet in this last stanza, as opposed to the person, is taken out of time (and so saved from death) by the shock use of the universal present, 'am' instead of the expected 'have been', followed by 'long ago' which refers to time long past. The ungrammatical comma between subject and predicate emphasizes this by forcing the accent on 'am' (When I, am long ago'). She lives on for a few centuries through her poems, for which she claims the kind of immortality possible to art.

The logical form of this poem, in its threshold contrast, reveals only part of its meaning. Its poetic structure is not linear but circular, the expansions and contractions of the two concepts of creative power taking place simultaneously. The drama is enacted in brief compass, the poet standing on the earth's surface, glancing up, then down, then within to measure her creative potential. As she contemplates the illimitable beauty of the heavens she makes the false attempt to lose herself by reaching out to the full circumference of the divine, but her mortal limitations immediately assert themselves and make this effort mere strutting. So she is drawn back to the earth as her proper centre. It is only there that she can both lose herself and find herself in her poems. As long as the first person 'My' is insisted on, they are described by the limited earthly word 'Menagerie'. But with the true losing of the self at the centre, sinking into the island of the grave, 'their Competeless Show' expands outward again to escape the limits of mortality. The poems become splendours, like the aurora.

The mortal who created them, on the other hand, becomes part of the menagerie, dies into the earth to be known only by the 'Daisies'—so the first version has it. But this choice was quickly recognized as conventional, endangering the poem with a weak ending, and it yielded to the alternate reading 'Beetles', which retains the specific quality of earthiness and fits better with the idea of a menagerie. As the next to last word, it creates with shuddering effect the contrast intended. For 'Beetles', replacing the sentimental atmosphere with the grim, also takes the mind back through grass to stem, oxygen, and men—all perishable and of this earth, though when transformed in her gala show, a sort of perennial circus, they will outlast the centuries. This is the true province of the poet. 'Beetles' may also take the attentive ear back to 'Bronze and Blaze', alliterating with these symbols of eternal beauty, towards which she can only feel awe. Such is the poet's legitimate goal. Her poems also may achieve circumference if she experiences the full meaning of her earth-bound life. This poem does so itself by its awful comprehension of man's transitoriness and the limited immortality of his creations, set against the perturbless blaze of celestial beauty. The assurance with which she moves towards this knowledge seems to be echoed in the progress from the suspended rhymes of the opening quatrain to the threefold exact rhyming of the concluding lines.

34

There Came a Day at Summer's Full

(First Published 1890)

I. TEXT

There came a Day at Summer's full,
Entirely for me—
I thought that such were for the Saints,
Where Resurrections—be—

The Sun, as common, went abroad,
The flowers, accustomed, blew,
As if no soul the solstice passed
That maketh all things new—

The time was scarce profaned, by speech—
The symbol of a word
Was needless, as at Sacrament,
The Wardrobe—of our Lord—

Each was to each The Sealed Church,
Permitted to commune this—time—
Lest we too awkward show
At Supper of the Lamb.

The Hours slid fast—as Hours will,
Clutched tight, by greedy hands—
So faces on two Decks, look back,
Bound to opposing lands—

And so when all the time had leaked,
Without external sound
Each bound the Other's Crucifix—
We gave no other Bond—

Sufficient troth, that we shall rise—
Deposed—at length, the Grave—
To that new Marriage,
Justified—through Calvaries of Love—

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This poem of Emily Dickinson is set at summer's full—the soul just passing the solstice. Both the pairs of lovers come to grips with love at full tide and acknowledge in their different ways its ripeness for fulfilment and make their renunciation fully realizing what they are renouncing. Using the terms of sparse Calvinistic theology, Emily brings her lovers (the fire of their love almost singes the symbol) into sacramental communion.

After hours of silence these lovers "Each bound the other's crucifix, We gave no others bond". Emily Dickinson saw no solution for renounced love in the philosophy of recompense. Her thwarted lovers rise immortally to a new marriage justified for them 'Through Calvaries of love !'

Emily Dickinson's view of love was conditioned by her horror of evanescence. She had to see that human attachments, like all other experiences, will be fleeting and transitory. No sooner are they founded than the attachments become vulnerable to the inroads of change and time. Perhaps death will intervene. Perhaps the emotions themselves will somehow be transmuted. But regardless of the reason, any kinship, from the moment of its establishment, marches steadily towards disruption. And visualizing personal ties in this light, Emily Dickinson was compelled to regard them as essentially frightening and painful. That is the important point. It makes no difference actually what kind of relationship she wrote about, or even whether she had specific relationships in mind. Love, conceived of in any form, was bound to appall her simply because of its precariousness. Even the prospect of being emotionally committed to someone else would prove terrifying to her because the commitment would have a way of reminding her of finalities and of the "Calvary of woe" which finalities impose.

This attitude is clearly evident in the present poem. Separation and loss, as they are presented here, have obviously been generalized into the effects of passing time. Whom the poet has lost seems highly unimportant. It could be anyone : there is certainly no hint of a tragic renunciation, and the absence of silly "narrative" details is a key reason for the superiority of this poem. What does emerge with tragic force, however, is the speaker's acute awareness of temporality, her perception that every relationship is foredoomed by change and can never be preserved from time's encroachments. The text, in short, is less about 'lovers' than about transiency, the transiency which weakens and destroys all human ties. The theme is deprivation, to be sure. But it is deprivation that involves a loss *to* time far more than the loss *of* a specific individual.

Mother Mary Anthony has tried to trace scriptural echoes in this poem. According to her the first clue is the word "revelations" at the end of the first stanza. The highly personal import of the poet's vision is stressed—"Entirely for me." John's vision was given by God "to make known to his servants". The contrast is [illegible] subtly set in the first stanza and modulated in the second where the terms are the quotidian and the unique—the commonplace behaviour of sun and flowers, and the soul-shaking "solstice" of the poet-lover.

The third and fourth stanzas can also be paired, with the key word "time" as opposed to eternity, pointing to a whole series of negative analogues between the two vision-experiences. The poet's time is signalized by silence, wordlessness ; speech would be a profanation. The apostle's timeless vision is full of utterance, vouchsafed or specially bidden ; indeed, here the word is sacred.

The evanescence of time is concretely imaged in stanza five, which at first glance seems without scriptural reference. But a background in vision literature is strongly implied. In the Old Testament no man could see God face to face and live. The consequence of the communion of stanza four is, logically, loss, and appropriately to the exclusively human character of the relationship, mutual loss. Again, there is significance in "hands" and "faces", and nothing else, representing the persons involved. These attributes may be thought of as distinctively human, but as approaching the Divine (The 'hand' and 'face' of God often symbolize his power and presence) at the same time as they differentiate man from beast. Are we then in the way of reconciliation (with God) through renunciation (of what is merely human) ?

The last two stanzas point to sacrifice, even to sacrificial "death", mutual and voluntary, followed by resurrection and "that new marriage" in eternity, "justified" through suffering.

35

The Wind Tapped Like a Tired Man

(First Published 1891)

I. TEXT

The Wind—tapped like a tired man—
And like a Host—"Come in"
I boldly answered—entered then
My Residence within

A Rapid—footless Guest—
To offer whom a Chair
Were as impossible as hand
A Sofa to the Air—

No Bone had He to bind Him—
His Speech was like the Push
Of numerous Humming Birds at once
From a superior Bush—

His Countenance—a Billow—
His Fingers, as He passed
Let go a music—as of tunes
Blown tremulous in Glass—

He visited—still flitting—
Then like a timid Man
Again, He tapped—'twas flurriedly—
And I became alone—

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

In this poem the poet has described her encounter with wind, which once visited her as a guest. The poet has concretised and humanised the invisible wind. The first two stanzas dramatize the situation :

> The Wind—tapped like a tired Man—
> And like a Host—"Come in"
> I boldly answered—entered then
> My Residence within

A Rapid—footless Guest—
To offer whom a Chair
Were as impossible as hand
A Sofa to the Air—

The tapping of the wind was rather weak, as if it came from a tired man, and the poet boldly asked it to come in. She found to her utter surprise a quick, footless guest enter her residence, "to offer whom a chair were as impossible as hand a sofa to the air." The description of the mysterious guest as an Incorporeal Presence follows :

No Bone had He to bind Him—
His Speech was like the Push
Of numerous Humming Birds at once
From a superior Bush—

His Countenance—a Billow—
His Fingers, as He passed
Let go a music—as of tunes
Blown tremulous in Glass—

A gentle, rustling murmur constituted the Wind's speech, as if it was the sweet humming of innumerable birds 'from a superior bush". Its face had the appearance of a 'Billow' and its fingers stirred a music of tremulous tunes. And finally, as the timid guest tapped again, it was only to leave the poet alone.

He visited—still flitting—
Then like a timid Man
Again, He tapped—'twas flurriedly—
And I became alone—

36

The Saddest Noise, The Sweetest Noise

(First Published 1898)

I. TEXT

The saddest noise, the sweetest noise,
    The maddest noise that grows,—
The birds, they make it in the spring,
    At night's delicious close.

Between the March and April line—
    That magical frontier
Beyond which summer hesitates,
    Almost too heavenly near.

It makes us think of all the dead
    That sauntered with us here,
By separation's sorcery
    Made cruelly more dear.

It makes us think of what we had,
    And what we now deplore.
We almost wish those siren throats
    Would go and sing no more.

An ear can break a human heart
    As quickly as a spear,
We wish the ear had not a heart
    So dangerously near.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The poet tells us in this poem that it is in Spring, when the night comes to a delicious close and the morning spreads out its sweet sheet of light, that we hear the 'saddest', 'sweetest' and 'maddest' music of the birds. Spring forms a magical frontier between March and April, beyond which the summer is getting ready ("hesitates") to take over :

The saddest noise, the sweetest noise,
    The maddest noise that grows,—
The birds, they make it in the spring,
    At night's delicious close.

Between the March and April line—
That magical frontier
Beyond which summer hesitates,
Almost too heavenly near.

Moreover, it is a season of remembrance :

It makes us think of all the dead
That sauntered with us here,
By separation's sorcery
Made cruelly more dear.

It makes us think of what we had,
And what we now deplore.
We almost wish those siren throats
would go and sing no more.

An ear can break a human heart
As quickly as a spear,
We wish the ear had not a heart
So dangerously near.

Pradman Krishen Dhar
M.A. (Pol. Sc. Eco. Ed. Hist.) B.Ed.
Motiyar Rain. wari
SRINAGAR-190003
KASHMIR

Spring makes us remember our losses, the loss of all those who have left for heavenly abode. The 'witchcraft of separation' intensely endears them to our heart. We remember what we possessed once a rich treasure, but now we 'deplore' its loss. The pangs of separation and memory induce in us a sudden dislike for the music coming from the 'siren throats' and we wish they would go away and sing no more. Their music hurts us as much as would a spear. A sweet sound can sting as sharply as the keenest weapon.

37

At Half Past Three, A Single Bird

(First Published,1891)

I. TEXT

At Half past Three, a single Bird
Unto a silent Sky
Propounded but a single term
Of cautious melody.

At Half past Four, Experiment
Had subjugated test
And lo, Her silver Principle
Supplanted all the rest.

At Half past Seven, Element
Nor Implement, be seen—
And Place was where the Presence was
Circumference between.

II. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

One phenomenon observed by all nature lovers, but rarely a subject of verse, is that period of time in May and June when birds announce the dawn, breaking into a great chorus of song, then falling silent at sunrise. Emily Dickinson twice made it the subject of a poem. The first, in six stanzas, she wrote about 1862, but left in a semifinal state with suggested changes for many words and phrases. Evidently she felt she had not transmuted the elusive quality of sound, the crescendo and diminuendo of the chorus, into poetry. Four years later she returned to the theme, encompassing it this time in three stanzas of the above poem.

The times are half past three and half past four in the morning and half past seven in the evening of a summer's day. Where has the music gone, the silver Principle, when it grows dark ? To some far corner of Circumference, the poet says, and that is a term she is fond of using. Perhaps it means : the World of all the Mysteries, where Principles have not necessarily perished when they have vanished. There is great metaphysical weight in that 'Circumference'—as there is in 'Principle' and 'Element'.

38

After Great Pain, A Formal Feeling Comes

(First Published 1929)

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Undoubtedly, Emily Dickinson's finest poem about pain and one of her artistic achievements is "After great pain, a formal feeling comes." Here the soul's numbed response after an enervating shock exemplifies a fundamental law : that pain is an unavoidable aspect of human existence. A carefully modulated structure, interlocking images of ceremony and crystallization, and acute psychological observations present the situation. The overall form of the poem exhibits the disjointed death throes of various parts of the body—the nerves, the heart, and the feet—where the dull instinctive reactions of the entire system gradually subside to a static, frozen immobility. The stages of pain pass from a funeral atmosphere, concentrating on images of ceremony and tombs in stanza one, to the mechanical wooden world of stanza two (where "Quartz contentment" is linked with tombs), and finally to the frozen death of stanza three, where leaden images climax in snow's blank desolation. Stately iambic pentameter, matched by rhyming couplets, opens and closes the poem, underscoring the ceremonial aspects of great pain. As Frank Manley has demonstrated in his analysis of the poem, a crystallization image guides the whole poem. Emily Dickinson describes a person who is alive yet insensible, a living organism frozen in eternal numbness.

> After great pain, a formal feeling comes—
> The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs—
> The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
> And Yesterday, or Centuries before ?

The poem's opening statement surprises, for great pain does not bring disorder or hysteria, only a carefully controlled, formal sensation that inspires awe. This formal feeling is immediately expanded by the funeral ritual in the next line. Here the usually active nerves sit decorously as people attending a wake, solemnly surrounding the corpse ("ceremonious" hints at a religious consolation, besides relating to the artificiality of funeral services). The final "tomb" image exemplifies this ceremonial aspect to suggest oppression and isolation, besides preparing for the later quartz association. Even the dull grey colour of tombstones is soon to be reflected by lead and snow images. The heart is stiff, as if overtaxed and aching after so much grief, but it is also rigidly controlled by this funeral service. The heart questions laboriously and haltingly, trying to link its suffering with that of Christ on the cross. Still, the emphasis on "bore" and the grim observation that the pain's intensity makes Calvary immediately present allow little religious consolation and no relief from pain's viselike hold.

> The Feet, mechanical, go round—
> Of Ground, or Air, or Ought—
> A Wooden way
> Regardless grown,
> A Quartz contentment, like a stone—

The second stanza deepens this despair by picturing the body as a mechanical object, a toy puppet, aimlessly dangling on its strings in a terrible parody of life's vitality. The "o" assonance captures the hollow thud of numbed feet bumping against wooden planking. The image progresses from walking to a helpless swinging in midair and finally to a circle of frustrating movement. "Ought" has various implications, the terror of being trapped in an endless circle, the daily round of social obligations and duties, and the ought of zero, the nothingness of blank despair. Finally, a "Quartz contentment" describes the body's state, suggesting quartz's hard, glossy finish as well as its smooth tactile quality that is unpleasantly cold. Yet this is a contentment, since this suspended state signifies the superior rank to which great pain has elevated the soul. Though somewhat like the vegetative life of a stone, this achievement has the more precious, regal qualities associated with quartz.

> This is the Hour of Lead—
> Remembered, if outlived,
> As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow—
> First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go—

The final stanza completes the crystallization process. The base, dull colour of lead prepares for the image of a person slowly freezing to death in the snow. The final line summarizes the whole poem as this pain progresses from the first sudden chill which retards movement and control to the numbness of wooden motion, until eventually the letting go of death and total inactivity occur. This, then, is the way one experiences pain, by a complete death of the senses and a freezing of all hope and activity. Paradoxically, the poet concludes that the real effect of pain is its absence, the utter numbness that only a severe wound could physically produce.

Let us now look at the poem more closely. The first stanza is held rigid by the ceremonious formality of the chamber of death when, after the great pain of its passing, the corpse lies tranquil and composed, surrounded by mourners hushed in awe so silent that time seems to have gone off into eternity "Yesterday, or Centuries before." In one respect this metaphor is particularly suitable since the nerves are situated round about the body or the "stiff Heart" like mourners about the bed of death. But if the metaphor is extended further, it seems to become ludicrously unsuitable. These nerves for example, are not neighbours lamenting with their silent presence the death of a friend. They are sensation itself, but here they are dead, as ceremonious and lifeless as tombs. Consequently, the formal feeling that comes after great pain is, ironically, no feeling at all, only benumbed rigidness. Conversely, if the "stiff Heart" is the corpse, he nevertheless has life or consciousness enough to question whether it was "He, that bore, And Yesterday, or Centuries before," Obviously, this is moving toward artistic chaos since metaphors should be more and more applicable the further they are extended, but this one apparently becomes progressively worse. Curiously, however, by breaking all the rules Dickinson achieved the exact effect she needed. Her problem was to describe an essentially paradoxical state of mind in which one is alive but yet numb to life, both a living organism and a frozen form. Consequently she took both terms of this paradox and made each a reversed reflection of the other. Although the mourners, the nerves, appear to be the living, they are in actuality the dead, and conversely the stiff heart, the metaphoric corpse, has ironically at least a semblance of consciousness. In their totality, both these forms of living death define the "stop sensation" that comes after great pain.

Since the metaphoric nightmare of the first stanza could hardly be extended any further, Dickinson is obviously not concerned with elaborating a conceit. In the second stanza, then, the cataleptically formal rites of the dead are replaced by a different sort of action ceremoniously performed in a trance, an extension not of the previous metaphor, but of the paradox which informed it. For although movement usually indicates vitality, there is no life in the aimless circles of the walking dead. Whether numb feet go on the hardness of ground or on the softness of air, their way is wooden because paralysis is within them. Since they cannot feel nor know nor even care where they are going ("Regardless grown"), they wander in circles ("go round") on an insane treadmill as though lost, suspended between life and death and sharing the attributes of both.

The third stanza is, in one respect, an imagistic repetition of the second. Benumbed, aimless movements through a world of waste, the motions of the living dead are similar to the trance-like, enchanted steps of persons freezing in a blank and silent world of muffling snow. But at the same time that this metaphor refers particularly to the preceding stanza, it also summarizes the entire poem since the ambiguous antecedent of *This* in line 10 is, in one respect, everything that went before. Consequently, this final image should somehow fuse all the essential elements of the poem. Not only that, it should present them in sharp focus.

Certainly the chill and subsequent stupor of freezing, a gradual numbing of the senses, incorporates many of the attributes of death itself: a loss of vital warmth, of locomotion, of a sense of identity in time and space conjoined with an increasing coolness, rigidness, and apathy. Since freezing, however, is neither life nor death but both simultaneously, it is an excellent, expansive metaphor for the living death which comes after great pain. But in addition to extending the basic paradox which informs the poem, this final figure serves a more important function by drawing to the surface and presenting in full ambivalence a certain ironic ambiguity which in the first two stanzas remains somewhat below the threshold of conscious awareness.

In its furthest extent great pain produces internal paralysis, but, ironically, this numbness is not itself a pain. It is no feeling, "an element of blank", which gradually emerges from the poem until at the end it almost engulfs it in white helplessness. In the first stanza it lurks just below the surface, unstated, but ironically present in the situation itself. For although the nerves represent metaphorically the formal feeling which comes after great pain by being silent, ceremonious mourners, they are simultaneously dead sensation, no feeling, formal or otherwise, not pain, but nothing. In the second stanza this implication is no longer subliminal, but even though it is at the surface, it is not developed, merely stated : "A Quartz contentment, like a stone." According to Webster's *American Dictionary* (1851), the lexicon Dickinson used, *contentment* was a "Rest or quietness of mind in the present condition; satisfaction which holds the mind in peace, restraining complaint, opposition, or further desire, and often implying a moderate degree of happiness." Apparently, then by the second stanza anguish has resolved itself into its impossible opposite, a hard, cold, quartz-like peaceful satisfaction of the mind. In the third stanza, this inert irony fully emerges to modify response and ultimately to qualify it to such an extent that the poem ends in tense, unresolved ambivalence. According to the superficial movement of the poem, the time after great pain will later be remembered as a period of living death similar to the sensation of freezing. Yet the qualifications attached to that statement drain it of its assertiveness and curiously force it to imply its own negative. For there is not only a doubt that this hour of crisis may not be outlived (line 11), but even the positive statement (that it will be remembered) is made fully ambivalent by being modified by its own negative (that it will be remembered just as freezing persons recollect the snow). Ironically, freezing persons can never remember the snow since they die in it, destroyed by a warm, contented numbness in which they sleep and perish in entranced delusion. Because there is no solution to this ambivalence, the poem ends unresolved, suspended between life and death in a quartz contentment, the most deadly anguish of all, the very essence of pain, which is not pain, but a blank peace, just as the essence of sound is silence.

39

My Life Had Stood A Loaded Gun

(First Published 1929)

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Love is doing as well as being. In the present poem Emily Dickinson finds an instrument adequate to render her need for fulfilment through absolute commitment to love's service. The poem begins with a brilliant conceit. Fused from the ambiguous abstraction 'Life' and the explicit concretion 'Loaded Gun', it expresses the charged potential of the human being who remains dormant until 'identified' into conscious vitality. 'At last, to be identified !' another poem began. And when she heard of a friend's engagement to be married she wrote : 'The most noble congratulation it ever befell me to offer—is that you are yourself. Till it has loved—no man or woman can become itself—Of our first Creation we are unconscious.'

The paradox of finding oneself through losing oneself in love is rendered in her poem by one word : she achieves *identity* when the lover claims her as his own. 'And carried Me away' has a double meaning encompassing both the portage of the gun and the transport of the beloved.

The first stanza presents a tightly knit unit. Its shock value inheres in the extreme disparity between the two things compared, incongruous in all ways except the startling points of likeness that can be ferretted out. The trap lies in the great precision needed to avoid confusing them, the vital but subjective 'Life' and the objective but inanimate 'Gun'. If she had chosen to use the strict method of metaphysical poetry, the succeeding stanzas would have been devoted to complicating and reconciling these disparities until they coalesce violently in the end.

Instead, after a brief setting introducing her over-image, she proceeds to develop it by the ballad narrative, to which her chosen metrical pattern was so well suited. In another sense, her poem is a domestication on American soil of the tradition of courtly love. The knight has turned pioneer, his quest a hunting expedition in the wilderness, his bower a cabin with feather-pillow and trusty rifle at his head, his lady the frontier wife who shares his hardships and adventures. In such a folk version of the troubadour lyric, the ballad stanza properly replaces the intricate Provencal forms. In the special climate of frontier America, another turn is given to the convention. Since the male provider is unavoidably committed to the strenuous life, here it is the woman who celebrates the softer arts, pledging eternal fidelity and the rapture of love's service. So the courtly roles are reversed : he is only the adored 'Master' while she is the joyous servant, which accounts for her assuming the active role in the love-game.

The hunting action of the second and third stanzas is given over to its devotional aspects. As steadfast companion, her words of love ring out in the gun's explosion, echoed by the mountains; her looks of love are the 'cordial light' of its fire, like the glow of Vesuvius in eruption. The quarry they hunt, 'the Doe', is appropriate to the romantic theme. But to counterbalance the danger of sentimentalism she makes a pervasive use of hyperbole, suggesting the tall-tale mode of western humour. The protective action of the next two stanzas portrays the service of love. To guard his sleep is better than to share his bed. This may only mean that she places a higher value on giving him peace than on enjoying connubial bliss, though there is a curious suggestion that the love is never fulfilled in the physical union. To give him security also calls forth an unquestioning loyalty destructive of his enemies, the jealous anger of the flashing muzzle's 'Yellow Eye' being a particularly happy extension of the image with which she began, the 'Loaded Gun.' Standing for the amorous potential of a newly vitalized life, this has been sustained through all the narrative centre, successfully taking the risks inherent in this anatomical-mechanical fusion of part to part—'speak', 'smile', 'face', and 'eye' applying to the gun as well as to love's servant. With 'thumb' it seems to break down in a shift of agency. Only the 'Owner' has a thumb to raise the hammer, and a finger to fire the gun, but here it fires itself. Her gun-life has so usurped the initiative as to reduce his function to hunting while she herself does the shooting. One of the hazards of the private poet is that the self tends to become the only reality. The lover here certainly plays a negative role.

The final stanza presents a more serious problem to be resolved. A metaphysical poet would have brought his series of shocks to rest in some unexpected figure evolved out of the initial conceit, but her gun only survives in the teasing antithesis of 'kill' and 'die'. A balladist would have rung down the curtain with an ending in surprise comedy or stark tragedy. Instead, she makes a third switch in technique and concludes with an aphorism that seems to have little structural relation to the rest of the poem.

Though the conclusion is a disturbing departure in mode, it may be ventured that its thematic relevance is such as to make it a resolution of all that has gone before. Perhaps this is a poem about the limitations of mortal love and a yearning for the superior glories of the immortal kind. If this is so, then the last stanza is not a moralistic commentary on the narrative but the very meaning which the elaborated image finally creates.

40

This Was A Poet

(First Published 1929)

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Emily Dickinson's apostrophe to an unnamed genius tells us about the function of a poet and the process of poetry as in this poem.

The rude accents of the first line make emphatic her equation of poetry with perfume. There are some interesting points in this poem, chiefly that although the poet's materials are 'ordinary' and 'familiar', what he distills from them is 'amazing' and 'immense'. Like all essential oils, the poetry is hard to come by. Just as attar of roses is a fragrant concrete extracted from the petals of the flower, so poetry is condensed from experience, hers being notably compact.

The poet also reveals to our incredulous eyes magnificent pictures, which make us realize our own emotional poverty in comparison to the poet's emotional wealth. Finally, the poet is a fortune unto himself, even beyond the sure reach of time.

41

Shall I Take Thee, The Poet Said

(First Published 1945)

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The special charm of this poem is that it re-enacts as a little comedy her own abandonment of numerous poems in the worksheet stage. The actors here are The Poet, The Words, The Muses (who fail her), and A Ghost (the original poetic vision). The stage props are a judge's bench, a lexicon, a summons bell, and the seats for the contending parties. The final touch is that this poem itself is unfinished, written in pencil, and with several unsummoned candidates at the bottom of the page, one of which would make line four read : 'Till I have *vainer* tried'. This reading implies that there are some visions beyond any poet's grasp : not even the angels can help the mortal name immortality. In any event, she relies upon 'Philology' rather than the 'Cherubim' when nominating words for election to her poems. This is at the opposite pole from Emerson's easy dismissal of the difficulties of poetic composition : 'When the soul of the poet has come to ripeness of thought, she detaches and sends away...poems or songs'. Dickinson had more respect for the problems of technique.

This poem is extremely instructive in indicating Emily Dickinson's actual method of composition and in suggesting the relationship between rational labour and inspiration. The two instances of the numerous word "candidates" partly fulfil the poet's intention but also suggest new words which more aptly represent further aspects of the total conception. Soon the train of "candidates" has exhausted every facet and implication of the idea, and in doing so has securely established the fully developed idea in the poet's mind. But still no one word is adequate to the idea. As the poet attempts to choose the best alternative, the "cherubim" of artistic inspiration reveal the precise word which completes the "vision". It is significant that the revealed word comes "unsummoned" in a flash of intuition. Such a word admits of no hesitation or doubt in the poet's mind. And yet the implication of the poem is that the revealing of the word must be preceded by the prepatory, conscious, rational effort of probing philology. Perhaps we can assume that the long series of "nominations" with no indicated choice which occur in some of her manuscript poems represent occasions when a portion of the vision was not filled by the revelation of the cherubim. She herself was well aware that inspiration, while all-sufficient when present, seldom came even to a great poet.

42

Select Literary Criticism

(1)

Faithfulness to the Deeper Self

One might think of Dickinson's poems as a record of a continuous dialogue between parts of herself, aspects of her mind, segments of her complex heritage; except that there are not just the two speakers required by dialogue but always a third, a watcher and listener, amused or dismayed, aware of the limitations of what can be conveyed by words, superior to all dialogue. This ultimate self watches the self writing in the diary or engaging in poetic debate. This self is absolute.

> Lad of Athens, faithful be
> To Thyself,
> And Mystery—
> All the rest is Perjury—

The "lad of Athens" is probably Dionysius the Areopagite, of whom we read in Acts 17 : 34 that he was one of those converted by Paul's preaching on Mars Hill in Athens. Prior to his conversion, he was presumably also one of those whom Paul accused of worshipping a "God Unknown". The poem, which Johnson tentatively dates only a few years before the poet's death, tells us how well she understood what Emerson had meant by "self-reliance" and how much the idea continued to mean to her to the end. The self to which one must be faithful was deeper than the rational or the believing self, deeper than all proof and all argument, a self, as he had said, with no known or knowable circumference. Not to rely on *this* self would be to refuse all ultimate responsibility. *This* self might entertain any sort of argument, consider any sort of evidence, face any fact, and remain, as Whitman put it, "imperturbable". No merely logical contradiction could embarrass it.

The poem also tells us what Emerson had meant by his warning against a "foolish consistency". The thrust of his aphorism is against our superficial selves, our social and conventional and worldly selves, which he fears may prevent our being true to the deeper self. The thrust is against the claim of propositional reason to be the arbiter of truth, against the kind of concern for logical consistency that would prevent us from changing our minds, once we had become committed to a proposition, against being imprisoned in our own categories. If in fact as he said "there is no circumference to us", then the only consistency that matters might better be called by another name, perhaps integrity. Emerson's warning is in effect a plea, a plea for openness, for growth, for never closing the circle.

"Philosophic" consistency would not be expected of a poet who held such ideas as these. Even when she argued against him, Dickinson was true to Emerson's principles. *Everything* is perjury that does not spring from faithfulness to the self that transcends all argument and all knowing.

—*Hyatt H. Waggoner*

(2)

Unity of Verse and Vision

Emily Dickinson's original (in the sense of being wholly personal) and unexceptional attitude toward experience, gains force by its presentation in verse correspondingly original in form and idiom. Its beauty is the beauty of gems and fine gold—though it would be difficult to find a comparison which seems so obviously and infuriatingly inappropriate. It would be far more apposite to say that her poetry resembles fused quartz, if one could be sure that this picture would suggest any idea of beauty at all. The essential point is to convey the impression of verse which has been fired to a final release from softening alloy—verse which achieves full identity with Beauty without ever being demonstrably "beautiful". No doubt it is merely an unfamiliar truism to suggest that what immediately impresses our senses as beautiful is, in truth, but halfway between prettiness and beauty—an adulterant of that absolute Beauty which is too blasting to touch us caressingly : absolute Beauty and absolute Truth exist nowhere but in Deity and are manifested only in the Face of God. The nearer a poet approaches to ultimate harmony with the universe, the closer is the approach to absolute Beauty and the less likelihood is there of that harmony issuing in "beautiful" verse. It is certain, at any rate, that in Emily Dickinson the verse and the vision are one. Her apparent simplicity is as delusive as Blake's ; and she uses no poetic ornamentation. When simple metrical rhyming verse serves for what she has to say, she uses that. When assonance, or half-rhymes, or a-meter serve better, she uses any or all of those devices. But always the thing-to-be-said finds the fit mould that will exactly contain it in utmost concentration—which is only to express in another way what has already been noted, namely, that her vision and her verse attain the unity which is achieved only by poets of a high order.

—*A. C. Ward*

(3)

Abstraction and Sensation

The poet attains a mystery over experience by facing its utmost implications. There is the clash of powerful opposites, and in all great poetry—for Emily Dickinson is a great poet—it issues in a tension between abstraction and sensation in which the two elements may be, of course, distinguished logically, but none really. We are shown our roots in Nature without being delivered into her hands. When it is possible for a poet to do this for us with the greatest imaginative comprehension, a possibility that the poet cannot himself create, we have the perfect literary situation. Only a few times in the history of English poetry has this situation come about : notably, the period between about 1580 and the Restoration. There was a similar age in New England from which emerged two talents of the first order—Hawthorne and Emily Dickinson.

There is an epoch between James and Miss Dickinson. But between her and Hawthorne there exists a difference of intellectual quality. She lacks almost radically the power to seize upon and understand abstractions for their own sake ; she does not separate them from the sensuous illuminations that she is so marvellously adept at ; like Donne, she *perceives abstraction* and *thinks sensation.* But Hawthorne was a master of ideas, within a limited range ; this narrowness confined him to his own kind of life, his own society, and out of it grew his typical forms of experience, his steady, almost obsessed vision of man ; it explains his depth and intensity. Yet he is always conscious of the abstract, doctrinal aspect of his mind, and when his vision of action and emotion is weak, his work becomes didactic. Now Miss Dickinson's poetry often runs into quasi-homiletic forms, but it is never didactic. Her very ignorance, her lack of formal intellectual training, preserved her from the risk that imperiled Hawthorne. She cannot reason at all. She can only *see*. It is impossible to imagine what she might have done with drama or fiction ; for, not approaching the puritan temper and through it the puritan myth, through human action, she is able to grasp the terms of the myth directly and by a feat that amounts almost to anthropomorphism, to give them a luminous tension, a kind of drama, among themselves.

—*Allen Tate*

(4)

An Epigrammatic Symbolist

The resemblance of Emily Dickinson's rhythms and imperfect rimes to Emerson's is important, but is superficial in comparison to the deeper and more significant relationships of style and epigrammatic manner. Of course Emily's fractures of grammatical rules and dictionary pronunciations are hardly ever paralleled in Emerson's verse, but even these faults are not difficult to reconcile with Emerson's doctrines of spontaneity and individualism of poetic technique. Conrad Aiken has made a still more important comparison : "The thought is there" in Emily Dickinson's poems, he says, "hard, bright, and clear ; and her symbols, her metaphors, of which she could be prodigal, have all analogous clarity and translucency... Emerson's gnomic style she tunes up to the epigrammatic—the epigrammatic she often carries to the point of the cryptic, she becomes what one might call an epigrammatic symbolist.

The epigram is so packed with meaning that the thought becomes of far more importance than rhythm, rime, and word-music. There is some beautiful music in Emily Dickinson's poems, yet in reading them we are usually far more conscious of the thought than the music. This fact probably explains why her versification has been so puzzling to some critics. She often had to sacrifice versification for a closely-packed metaphor or a barbed epigram, not because she had any intention of breaking the conventional rules but because what she had to say did not precisely fit the accentuation and from which the conventional scheme demanded....Finally, Emily Dickinson's poetic style is ejaculatory, suggestive rather than completely formed, and it is perhaps in this respect most of all that she is a link between Emerson and the "Imagists".

—*Gay Wilson Allen*

(5)

The Sublime and the Trivial

Thus, from one point of view, Emily Dickinson is a realist examining, as she says, each splinter in the groove of the brain ; a witty piquant preceptress on all the common life about her, and also on its divine origins. She writes of the bee, the bobolink, the spider, the bat, the storm, noon, the sunset, or the preacher with his preposterous sermon on "breadth". In this role of commentator on things visible and invisible she aphorizes on God, human love, death, and also on mermaids and angleworms. In her poetry the sublime and the trivial jostle each other and evoke from her mingled reverence and satire, as in the response to her prayer for "content", that is, for a modest little heaven of her own :

A smile suffused Jehovah's face ;
The cherubim withdrew ;
Grave saints stole out to look at me,
And showed their dimples, too.

For the poem conveys her conviction, held momentarily, that a voice does not come out of silence. That God answers our prayers, is the certain "swindle."

...To adopt her own metaphor, she does little sums of spiritual arithmetic ; and her epigrammatic conclusions, sometimes sombre or even Freudian as in her dream of the worm, are as memorable as Hawthorne's elaborate clinics in the moral impulse. His symbols too often wear the solemn splendour of his letter 'A' in the heavens ; hers shine with the frosty twinkle of the stars. She is a detached critic of men's hopes and fears ; this is especially true of her poems on human problems. Yet, particularly in her poetry on nature, she cherishes a fairylike intimacy with plant and bird. No naturalist, still she knew them all and believed that these mute creatures expressed thoughts surpassing her own. At the same time she is enchantingly literal. The snow falls in the ruts like "alabaster wool"; the dog goes along on "feet of intermittent plush"; the bat wears his "small umbrella, quaintly halved"; the moon has a "chin of gold"; the grass "threads the dews all night like pearls"; the bobolink is the "rowdy of the meadow." She startles with a phrase: the dead, in their alabaster chambers, rest under "rafter of satin and roof of stone". She personifies sharply, in contrast to Lanier's vague figures, Death who stops for her in his carriage; or she invents adverbs:

Kingdoms like the orchard
Flit russetly away.

In brief, poetry is her "playmate" with which she tries a thousand games of colour, light, and sound.

—Stanley T. Williams

(6)

Emily Dickinson's Kinaesthetic Imagery

Emily Dickinson's kinaesthetic imagery by its persistence constitutes the central visual metaphor by which she apprehends experience. She confronts repeatedly the inescapable riddle of physical and spiritual change, movement, and metamorphosis, and this concern mirrors directly the polar disposition of the real and the conjectured, the actual and the ideal, which engaged her attention. Movement and change represent for Emily Dickinson the process by which one passes from personal isolation to a consummate union, from artistic endeavour to literary immortality, and from spiritual aspiration to spiritual immortality. In more abstract terms, the process is the change from the condition of possibility—emotional artistic, spiritual—to the state of self-fulfilment, "Existence's whole Arc filled up", as she says in a later poem.

The inhering unity of the early poetry is formed in part by the recurrent kinetic imagery, as unity derives also from the controlling theme, the characteristic duality of the persona, and formal base of hymnody. The creative artistry, in turn, is manifested in the individual manner with which Emily Dickinson employs her images, and particularly in the way they objectify both the tension of emotional turmoil and the perceived flux in the outer world of nature. In "An altered look about the hills", the depiction of motion dramatizes the irrevocable yet almost imperceptible onset of spring.

The range of intensity of movement which Emily Dickinson creates extends far beyond the examples in this early treatment of nature's subtle alterations. Perhaps her ultimate expression is in the late poem "A Route of Evanescence", which can serve here as a touchstone for her kinetic imagery in the earlier works. The imagery is of whirring, scarcely visible, flight...The poet's maturing facility of expression is apparent in the contrasting treatments in the two poems. In "An altered look about the hills" she suggests movement by the auditory and visual connotations of the verbs and adjectives; in this later poem there are but three kinaesthetic adjectives —*revolving, tumbled, easy*—and only a single verb—*adjusts*. The vivid auditory representation of the humming-bird's motion is achieved by alliteration—*Route, revolving, Resonance, Rush*—as well as by consonance—*Evanescence, Resonance, Blossom, Adjusts, Tunis, Rush, Bush,* *easy* and *Morning's*. The words, significantly, which evoke the sense of motion are, with few exceptions, nouns. In effect, the pressure of motion is so intense it has imbued normally inert abstractions with the illusion of speed so rapid, as in the flight of the humming-bird, that the eye is less useful than the ear, and the ear less perceptive than the imagination. The bird darts so quickly only the sound lingers and to the eye only the tumbled blossoms give evidence of the flight.

In contrast to the intention in this remarkable poem is the imagery in another familiar work which can serve as a touchstone for the poet's creation of absolute stasis. In "After great pain, a formal feeling comes", the condition is not one of motion, but of the inertia which grief brings on. Again, nouns do the most effective metaphorical work. *Tombs, stone, lead,* and *snow* provide visual and tactile immediacy to the condition of paralysis induced by grief.

Emily Dickinson's obsessive concern with the things that flee, in nature and in one's life—the rainbow, the lover, the dead, faith—is translated through a broad range of imagery employed with an individuality clearly divergent from Puritan typology. Not only is the poet versatile and wide-ranging in selection, but she achieves a superior vividness and depth of statement through extreme concision and a unique, sometimes shocking, appropriation of both common and unexpected images to her intentions. In addition, her imagery for the things that fly contributes artfully to her metaphorical embodiment of that underside of her aspirational vision which is restless, doubt-ridden, continually thrusting toward the goal of self-fulfilment.

—*David T. Porter*

(7)

Truth and Intuition

The relationship between intuition and truth is not only significant for the subject matter of Emily Dickinson's poetry but for her manner as well. Intuition was the instrument of her creative act, the wand of spontaneity. For all her insistence on spontaneity, for all her reliance on intuition as the source of her creative power, for all her disavowal of revision, she worked, she did not merely transcribe the melodies chanting in her subliminal ear. There is the evidence of those innumerable variants, not the words on her manuscripts, but those clusters of poems in which the same image is transformed, the same conception is rendered with mutating emotional tones. Emily Dickinson did indeed subject her 'messages' to constant re-examination.

—*Ruth Miller*

(8)

Search for Perfection

But her search for perfection, her reworking of the poems, is more than a series of experiments with a single idea. Her variants are a search for an appropriate public demeanour. She records her desires, her anguish and despair, her bewilderment, her doubt, her faith, but always in metaphor. The image is itself the material of the mask. The poem is itself the shape of the mask. She fixes her eyes on the gauze wings of a butterfly and sees the manifest hand of God. Any talk of her paradoxes—of sense perception and surmise, of secular and spiritual worlds, of mortality and immortality, of transience and permanence—is small talk compared to the real paradox of this poet.

—*Ruth Miller*

(9)

Concern with Fundamental Questions

The first act of consciousness, therefore, is awareness of one's self in a separate but encompassing framework ; and the condition of living, if one is to 'live deliberately', adjusts and readjusts itself, seeking in multiplicity the unity to which one returns perhaps only in death. Poe expressed the cycle in this terse sentence from his last work, *Eureka* : "In the original unity of the first thing lies the secondary cause of all things, with the germ of their inevitable annihilation". The fascination of Emily Dickinson lies in the drama of this extraordinary consciousness which shrugged off peripheral distractions to fasten with almost exclusive intensity on first axioms and fundamental questions in a life-long, death-long struggle. The narrow circle of her consciousness contained, explicitly and implicitly, much that was convulsing and would convulse the American mind.

—*Albert J. Gelpi*

(10)

Rhymes and Rhythms

As for the irregularity of Emily's rhymes and rhythms, it is difficult to find any consistent explanation, or any principle in which they can be said to occur deliberately. Emily composed by instinct—which is not to say automatically. She used the basic rhythms of the hymns she had heard from childhood, adapting them to the need of the moment. Her instinct told her that mechanical regularity makes for monotony. Her rhythms, considered as personal variations on a rigid pattern, are to be justified, or found wanting, according to the shapes and sounds of particular poems. To my ear her rhythmic sense is seldom absolutely deficient, often inspired. There is more variety than the formal appearance of the poems would suggest, and a study of the rhythmic variations in any half-dozen of her best poems would reveal considerable subtlety.

—*James Reeves*

(11)

A New Medium of Poetic Expression

Although writers of free verse acknowledge a debt to Emily Dickinson, she wrote in fact almost nothing which today would be called *vers libre*, that is, cadenced verse, as distinguished from that which is metrical or rhymed. Her first attempt to do so in 1862, "Victory comes late", seems to have been her last, for it evidently convinced her that such a form was not the medium which best transmitted her mood and ideas. There are a variety of ways to gain controlled liberty. She herself, she felt, needed rhyme and meter. To her contemporaries and to most critics at the time her poems were first published, her seemingly unpatterned verses appeared to be the work of an original but undisciplined artist. Actually she was creating a new medium of poetic expression.

—*Thomas H. Johnson*

(12)

Perception of Nature

In her passion for originality Dickinson managed on the whole to avoid the dangers of derivativeness in her nature poetry, partly by choosing novel forms to 'imitate'. But having rejected the conventional approaches of the past hundred years, she found nature an increasingly difficult and baffling subject. When she treated it as mere spectacle her poems tended to run off into fantasy, though she achieved some real successes in this genre, as in her tribute to the grass. When she attempted to capture it directly they tended, in spite of her acute descriptive powers, to shatter themselves in a cataract of images, except for her poems on eccentrics like the bat. Her best efforts grew more directly out of her theory of perception —that which is gained by the mind in compensation for the loss of the object. The former is the only reality the poet can know, and it defines the kind of beauty he can create. Emphasis on the latter produced a corollary to her general rule limiting the mimetic powers : her theory of the evanescence of objective beauty before the poet's very eyes.

—*Charles R. Anderson*

(13)

Fusion of Thought and Feeling

Philosophical poetry she eschewed, but much of her best work, exploring various aspects of consciousness, is a subtle poetry of ideas. Since she was also a lyric poet, her aim was to achieve a true fusion of thought and feeling. She did so in a series of remarkably precise analyses of intense pleasure and intense pain. A concordance to her poems confirms the casual reader's impression, by revealing extraordinarily large word clusters around these two poles. There are nearly three hundred poems with key words ranging from the worldly 'gay' to the celestial 'bliss', more than two hundred covering every shade from 'ache' to 'woe'. For one who is aware of her preference for the poetry of power, and one who remembers the extremes of her nature poetry leaping from spiders to the aurora, it is not surprising to find that the strongly charged emotions drew her most : rapture and transport, anguish and misery.

—*Charles R. Anderson*

(14)

The Tone of Poetry

...I should like to submit that her tone is the root itself of her greatness: The source of poetry, as Emily knew more positively than most, is a particular awareness of the world. "It is that", she says, meaning by "that" a poet, which "Distils amazing sense/ From ordinary Meanings", and the distillation is accomplished not by necromancy but by perception—by the particularity of the perception —which makes what is "ordinary meaning" to the ordinary, "amazing sense" to the poet. The key to the poetry of any poem, therefore, is its particularity—the uniqueness of its vision of the world it sees. In some poems the particularity can be found in the images into which the vision is translated. In others it seems to exist in the rhythm which carries the vision "alive into the heart". In still others it is found in a play of mind which breaks the light of the perception like a prism. The particularity has as many forms almost as there are poets capable of the loneliness in which uniqueness is obliged to live. With Emily Dickinson it is the tone and timbre of the speaking voice.

—Archibald MacLeish

(15)

Language

Emily's language is her own mixture of provincialisms, standard speech of her time, the concrete and the abstract, the words of young people and the theological words of orthodox preachers (e.g., infinite). Her use of language is almost unfailingly meditated and precise. Worksheet drafts for a few of her poems provide the list of alternatives from which she chose. In the poem on the Bible, the epithet finally elected—"warbling"—was chosen out of these possible dissyllables: "typic, hearty, bonnie, breathless, spacious, tropic, warbling, winning, mellow." None of these dissyllables seems inevitable; but warbling—the unpremeditated singing of a bird or a rustic—seems the best candidate.

—Austin Warren

(16)

Aphoristic Poetry

Emily Dickinson, since she was not writing novels, seldom projected her thoughts in terms of characters, but she did exteriorize and personify "ideas-emotions" or 'ideas-forces", which people, as in a morality play, the stage of her soul. The drama there enacted is a chaotic and often unresolved clash of opposing principles, as in life itself, but she does not let the play end in ruin and the victory of the Conqueror Worm. For her dramatic insights she found the brief lyric a suitable vehicle. A Melville or a Dostoievski might employ a novel, a Pascal or a Nietzsche an aphorism. It is not without significance that many of Emily's poems are aphoristic.

—George F. Whicher

(17)

A Private Poet

She was a private poet in a different sense, say, from Hopkins. In reaction against the current modes of Tennyson and Swinburne, he set himself, in his isolation, deliberately to shape a new style in poems that could not have been more highly wrought. Her process was almost wholly instinctive. No matter what shades of difference between her religious values and Emerson's, her way of writing continued to illustrate his conception of the Poet. That she believed no less than he that poetry could be written only in all-sufficient moments of inspiration is apparent from the state of her manuscripts. She wrote on every conceivable scrap of paper, brown grocery bags and the backs of drug store advertisements, with a partiality for the insides of used envelopes. Her verses were set down to satisfy an immediate need, and variant words were added as fast as they occurred to her.

—F. O. Matthiessen

(18)

Style and Diction

Her precision of statement is due to the directness with which the abstract framework of her thought acts upon its unorganized material. The two elements of her style, considered as point of view, are immortality, or the idea of permanence, and the physical process of death or decay. Her diction has two corresponding features: words of Latin or Greek origin and, sharply opposed to these, the concrete Saxon element. It is this verbal conflict that gives her verse its high tension ; it is not a device deliberately seized upon, but a feeling for language that senses out the two fundamental components of English and their metaphysical relation : the Latin for ideas and the Saxon for perceptions—the peculiar virtue of English as a poetic language.

—Allen Tate

(19)

Concentration and Intensity

Her poems are hard, sharply defined, packed with meaning. She is more stark than the poets of the seventeenth century; all extraneous luxuriance is stripped away. Perhaps this is the result of two centuries of Puritanism; it is more probably the consequence of her own character and the personal renunciation which seems to have sharpened it...But she achieves, as the result of this bareness, an epigrammatic quality which her seventeenth-century prototypes frequently lack. She excels at definition, and many of her poems have an aphoristic pregnancy : like those dry Japanese flowers which blossom out when put in water, her condensed preservations of experience spread and expand in the reader's mind.

—Theodore Spencer

(20)

Her World View

Emily Dickinson viewed a world made up of pieces which often did not dove-tail, and it was her impression of this world that she sought to express in her poetry. The annual resurrection in field and forest was to her extremely odd. Experience for her was a precarious gait. A splinter very often seemed to swerve in her brain while the brains of other people ran evenly and true within their grooves. She pondered a tremendous scene, and a little madness in her rhymes was part of her expression of it.

—*Susan Miles*

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Selected Critical Questions With Answers

Q. 1. "Emily Dickinson sang about privation, about the economy of desire." Discuss with reference to the prescribed poems.

Or

Q. 2. Emily Dickinson's poetry at its most mature continually proclaims that "to lose or forego what we desire is somehow to gain." Amplify and illustrate.

Or

Q. 3. Emily Dickinson repeatedly asserted the paradox that "privation is more plentiful than plenty ; that to renounce is to possess the more." Illustrate with reference to the poems read by you.

Ans. Emily Dickinson never lets us forget for very long that in some respects life gave her short measure ; and indeed it is possible to see the greater part of her poetry as an effort to cope with her sense of privation. It may safely be assumed that for her there were three major privations : she was deprived of an orthodox and steady religious faith ; she was deprived of love ; and she was deprived of literary recognition. At the age of seventeen, after a series of revival meetings at Mount Holyoke Seminary, Emily Dickinson found that she must refuse to become a professing Christian. To some modern minds this may seem to have been a sensible and necessary step ; and surely it was a step towards becoming such a poet as she became. But for her, no pleasure in her own integrity could then eradicate the feeling that she had betrayed a deficiency, a want of grace. In her letters to Abiah Root she tells of the enhancing effect of conversion on her fellow-students, and says of herself in a famous passage : "I am one of the lingering bad ones, and so do I slink away, and pause and ponder, and ponder and pause, and do work without knowing why, not surely, for this brief world, and more sure it is not for heaven, and I ask what this message *means* that they ask for so very eagerly : *you* know of this depth and fulness, will you try to tell me about it ?"

There is humour in that, and stubbornness, and a bit of characteristic lurking pride : but there is also an anguished sense of having separated herself, through some dry incapacity, from spiritual community, from purpose, and from magnitude of life. As a child of evangelical Amherst, she inevitably thought of purposive, heroic life as requiring a vigorous faith. Out of such a thought she later wrote :

> The abdication of Belief
> Makes the Behaviour small—
> Better an ignis fatuus
> Than no illume at all—

That hers was a species of religious personality goes without saying ; but by her refusal of such ideas as original sin, redemption, hell, and election, she made it impossible for herself "to share the religious life of her generation". She became an unsteady congregation of one.

Her second privation, the privation of love, is one with which her poems and her biographies have made us exceedingly familiar, though some biographical facts remain conjectural. She had the good fortune, at least once, to bestow her heart on another ; but she seems to have found her life, in great part, a history of loneliness, separation, and bereavement.

As for literary fame, some will deny that Emily Dickinson ever greatly desired it, and certainly there is evidence, mostly from her latter years, to support such a view. She *did* write that "Publication is the auction/ Of the mind of man". And she *did* say to Helen Hunt Jackson, "How can you print a piece of your soul ?" But earlier, in 1861, she had frankly expressed to Sue Dickinson the hope that "sometime" she might make her kinfolk proud of her. The truth is, probably, that Emily Dickinson knew she was good, and began her career with a normal appetite for recognition. But she later came, with some reason, to despair of being understood or properly valued, and so directed against her hopes of fame what was by then a well-developed disposition to renounce. That she wrote a good number of poems about fame supports this view : the subjects to which a poet returns are those which vex him.

What did Emily Dickinson do, as a poet, with her sense of privation ? One thing she quite often did was to pose as the laureate and attorney of the empty-handed, and question God about the economy of His creation. Why, she asked, is a fatherly God so sparing of His presence ? Why is there never a sign that prayers are heard ? Why does Nature tell us no comforting news of its Maker ? Why do some receive a whole loaf, while others must starve on a crumb ? Where is the benevolence in shipwreck and earthquake ? By asking such questions as these, she turned complaint into critique, and used her own sufferings as experiential evidence about the nature of the deity. The God who emerges from these poems is a God who does not answer, an unrevealed God whom one cannot confidently approach through Nature or through doctrine.

But there was another way in which Emily Dickinson dealt with her sentiment of lack—another emotional strategy which was both more frequent and more fruitful. This refers to her repeated assertion of the paradox that privation is more plentiful than plenty ; that to renounce is to possess the more ; that "The Banquet of abstemiousness/ Defaces that of wine." We all know how the poet illustrated this ascetic paradox in her behaviour—how in latter years she chose to live in relative retirement, keeping the world, even in its dearest aspects, at a physical remove. She would write her friends, telling them how she missed them, then flee upstairs when they came to see her ; afterwards, she might send a note of apology, offering the odd explanation that "We shun because we prize." Any reader of Dickinson biographies can furnish other examples, dramatic or homely, of this prizing and shunning, this yearning and renouncing : in our own mind's eye is a picture of Emily Dickinson watching a gay circus caravan from the distance of her chamber window.

In her inner life, as well, she came to keep the world's images, even the images of things passionately desired, at the remove which renunciation makes ; and her poetry at its most mature continually proclaims that to lose or forego what we desire is somehow to gain. We may say, if we like, with some of the poet's commentators, that this central paradox of her thought is a rationalization of her neurotic plight ; but we had better add that it is also a discovery of something about the soul. Let us examine a little poem of psychological observation which, whatever its date of composition, may logically be considered as an approach to that discovery.

Undue Significance a starving man attaches
To Food—
Far off—He sighs—and therefore—Hopeless—
And therefore—Good—
Partaken—it relieves—indeed—
But proves us
That Spices fly
In the Receipt—It was the Distance—
Was Savoury—

This poem describes an educational experience, in which a starving man is brought to distinguish between appetite and desire. So long as he despairs of sustenance, the man conceives it with the eye of desire as infinitely delicious. But when, after all, he secures it and appeases his hunger, he finds that its imagined spices have flown. The moral is plain : once an object has been magnified by desire, it cannot be wholly possessed by appetite.

The poet is not concerned, in this poem, with passing any judgment. She is simply describing the way things go in the human soul, telling us that the frustration of appetite awakens or abets desire, and that the effect of intense desiring is to render any finite satisfaction disappointing. Let us now examine another poem, in which Emily Dickinson is again considering privation and possession, and the modes of enjoyment possible to each. In this case, a judgment is strongly implied :

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory

As he defeated—dying—
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear !

Certainly Emily Dickinson's critics are right in calling this poem an expression of the idea of compensation—of the idea that every evil confers some balancing good, that through bitterness we learn to appreciate the sweet, that "Water is taught by thirst." The defeated and dying soldier of this poem is compensated by a greater awareness of the meaning of victory than the victors themselves can have : he can comprehend the joy of success through its polar contrast to his own despair.

The poem surely does say that ; yet it seems that there is something further implied. On a first reading, we are much impressed with the wretchedness of the dying soldier's lot, and an improved understanding of the nature of victory may seem small compensation for defeat and death ; but the more one ponders this poem the likelier it grows that Emily Dickinson is arguing the *superiority* of defeat to victory, of frustration to satisfaction, and of anguished comprehension to mere possession. What do the victors have but victory, a victory which they cannot fully savour or clearly define ? They have paid for their triumph by a sacrifice of awareness ; a material gain has cost them a spiritual loss. For the dying soldier, the case is reversed : defeat and death are attended by an increase of awareness, and material loss has led to spiritual gain. The poem assures us that food, or victory, or any other good thing is best comprehended by the eye of desire from the vantage of privation. We must now ask in what way desire can define things, what comprehension of nectars it can have beyond a sense of inaccessible sweetness.

Emily Dickinson discovered that the soul has an infinite hunger, a hunger to possess all things. (That discovery was, perhaps, the major fruit of her introspection.) Then she distinguished two ways of possessing things, the way of appetite and the way of desire. She said of her favourite insect, the bee :

Auto da Fe and Judgment—
Are nothing to the Bee—
His separation from His Rose—
To Him—sums Misery—

The creature of appetite (whether insect or human) pursues satisfaction, and strives to possess the object in itself ; it cannot imagine the vaster economy of desire, in which the pain of abstinence is justified by moments of infinite joy, and the object is spiritually possessed, not merely for itself, but more truly as an index of the All. That is how one comprehends a nectar. Emily's bee does not comprehend the rose which it plunders, because the truer sweetness of the rose lies beyond the rose, in its relationship to the whole of being ; but she would say that G.M. Hopkins comprehends a bluebell when, having noticed its intrinsic beauties, he adds, "I know the beauty of Our Lord by it." And here is an eight-line poem of her own, in which she comprehends the full sweetness of water :

We thirst at first—'tis Nature's Act—
And later—when we die—
A little Water supplicate—
Of fingers going by—

It intimates the finer want—
Whose adequate supply
Is that Great Water in the West—
Termed Immortality—

Emily Dickinson elected the economy of desire, and called her privation good, rendering it positive by renunciation. And so she came to live in a huge world of delectable distances. Far-off words like 'Brazil' or 'Circassian' appear continually in her poems as symbols of things distanced by loss or renunciation, yet infinitely prized and yearned-for. So identified in her mind are distance and delight that, when ravished by the sight of a humming-bird in her garden, she calls it "the mail from Tunis". And not only are the objects of her desire distant ; they are also very often moving away, their sweetness increasing in proportion to their remoteness. "To disappear enhances", one of the poems begins, and another closes with these lines :

The Mountain—at a given distance—
In Amber—lies—
Approached—the Amber flits—a little—
And That's—the Skies—

To the eye of desire, all things are seen in a profound perspective, either moving or gesturing towards the vanishing-point. Or to use a figure which may be closer to Emily Dickinson's thought, to the eye of desire the world is a centrifuge, in which all things are straining or flying towards the occult circumference. In some such way, Emily Dickinson conceived her world, and it was in a spatial metaphor that she gave her personal definition of Heaven. "Heaven", she said, "is what I cannot reach".

Q. 4. "The poems of Emily Dickinson are a continual appeal to experience, motivated by an arrogant passion for the truth." Discuss.

Or

Q. 5. Emily Dickinson's chief truthfulness lay in her insistence on discovering the facts of her inner experience. In what form is this truthfulness reflected in her poetry ?

Or

Q. 6. "Emily Dickinson's poetry, with its articulate faithfulness to inner and outer truth, its insistence on maximum consciousness, is not an avoidance of life but an eccentric mastery of it". Amplify.

Ans. The poems of Emily Dickinson are a continual appeal to experience motivated by an arrogant passion for truth. "Truth is so rare a thing," she once said, "it is delightful to tell it." And, sending some poems to Colonel Higginson, she wrote, "Excuse them, if they are untrue." And again, to the same correspondent, she observed, "Candour is the only wile"—meaning that the writer's bag of tricks need contain one trick only, the trick of being honest. That her taste for truth involved a regard for objective fact need not be argued : we have her poem on the snake, and that on the humming-bird, and they are small masterpieces of exact description. She liked accuracy ; she liked solid and homely detail ; and even in her most exalted poems we are surprised and reassured by buckets, shawls, or buzzing flies.

But her chief truthfulness lay in her insistence on discovering the facts of her inner experience. She was a Linnaeus to the phenomena of her own consciousness, describing and distinguishing the states and motions of her soul. The results of this "psychic reconnaissance," were several. For one thing, it made her articulate about inward matters which poetry had never so sharply defined ; specifically, it made her capable of writing two such lines as these :

> A perfect, paralyzing bliss
> Contented as despair.

We often assent to the shock of a paradox before we understand it, but those lines are so just and so concentrated as to explode their meaning instantly in the mind. They did not come so easily to Emily Dickinson. Such lines were actually the fruit of long poetic research ; the poet had worked towards them through much study of the way certain emotions can usurp consciousness entirely, annulling our sense of past and future, cancelling near and far, converting all time and space to a joyous or grievous here and now. It is in their ways of annihilating time and space that bliss and despair are comparable.

This leads to a second consequence of Emily Dickinson's self-analysis. It is one thing to assert as pious doctrine that the soul has power, with God's grace, to master circumstance. It is another thing to find out personally, as Emily Dickinson did in writing her psychological poems, that the aspect of the world is in no way constant, that the power of external things depends on our state of mind, that the soul selects its own society and may, if granted strength to do so, select a superior order and scope of consciousness which will render it finally invulnerable. She learned these things by witnessing her own courageous spirit.

Another result of Emily Dickinson's introspection was that she discovered some grounds, in the nature of her soul and its affections, for a personal conception of such ideas as Heaven and Immortality, and so managed a precarious convergence between her inner experience and her religious inheritance. At times it seems that there is nothing in her world but her own soul, with its attendant abstractions, and, at a vast remove, the inscrutable Heaven. On most of what might intervene she has closed the valves of her attention, and what mortal objects she does acknowledge are riddled by desire to the point of transparency. Here is a sentence from her correspondence : "Enough is of so vast a sweetness, I suppose it never occurs, only pathetic counterfeits." The writer of that sentence could not invest her longings in any finite object. Again she wrote, "Emblem is immeasurable—that is why it is better than fulfilment, which can be drained." For such a sensibility, it was natural and necessary that things be touched with infinity. Therefore her nature poetry, when most serious, does not play descriptively with birds or flowers but presents us repeatedly with dawn, noon, and sunset, those grand ceremonial moments of the day which argue the splendour of Paradise. Or it shows us the ordinary landscape transformed by the electric brilliance of a storm ; or it shows us the fields succumbing to the annual mystery of death.

In her love-poems, Emily Dickinson was at first covetous of the beloved himself ; indeed, she could be idolatrous, going so far as to say that his face, should she see it again in Heaven, would eclipse the face of Jesus. But in her later work the beloved's lineaments, which were never very distinct, vanish entirely ; he becomes pure emblem, a symbol of remote spiritual joy, and so is all but absorbed into the idea of Heaven. The lost beloved is, as one poem declares, "infinite when gone", and in such lines as the following we are aware of him mainly as an instrument in the poet's commerce with the beyond.

Of all the Souls that stand create—
I have elected—One—
When Sense from Spirit—files away—
And Subterfuge—is done—
When that which is—and that which was—
Apart—intrinsic—stand—
And this brief Tragedy of Flesh—
Is shifted—like a Sand—
When Figures show their royal Front—
And Mists—are carved away,
Behold the Atom—I preferred—
To all the lists of Clay !

In this extraordinary poem, the corporeal beloved is seen as if from another and immaterial existence, and in such perspective his earthly person is but an atom of clay. His risen spirit, we presume, is more imposing, but it is certainly not in focus. What the rapt and thudding lines of this poem portray is the poet's own magnificence of soul—her fidelity to desire, her confidence of Heaven, her contempt of the world. Like Cleopatra's final speeches, this poem is an irresistible demonstration of spiritual status, in which the supernatural is so royally demanded that skepticism is disarmed. A part of its effect derives, by the way, from the fact that the life to come is described in an ambiguous present tense, so that we half-suppose the speaker to be already in Heaven.

There were times when Emily Dickinson supposed this of herself. She generally saw Heaven as a kind of infinitely remote bank, in which, she hoped, her untouched felicities were drawing interest. Parting, she said, was all she knew of it. Hence it is surprising to find her saying, in some poems, that Heaven has drawn near to her, and that in her soul's "superior instants" Eternity has disclosed to her "the colossal substance/ Of immortality." Yet the contradiction can be understood, if we recall what sort of evidence was persuasive to Emily Dickinson.

"Too much of proof", she wrote, "affronts belief" ; and she was little convinced either by doctrine or by theological reasoning. Her residual Calvinism was criticized and fortified by her study of her own soul in action, and from the phenomena of her soul she was capable of making the boldest inferences. That the sense of time is subject to the moods of the soul seemed to her a proof of the soul's eternity. Her intensity of grief for the dead, and her feeling of their continued presence, seemed to her arguments for the reunion of souls in Heaven. And when she found in herself infinite desires, 'immortal longings', it seemed to her possible that such desires might somewhere be infinitely answered.

One psychic experience which she interpreted as beatitude was "glee" or as some would call it, euphoria. Now, a notable thing about glee or euphoria is its gratuitousness. It seems to come from nowhere, and it was this apparent sourcelessness of the emotion from which Emily Dickinson made her inference. "The happiness without a cause", she said, "is the best happiness, for glee intuitive and lasting is the gift of God." Having forgone all earthly causes of happiness, she could only explain her glee, when it came, as a divine gift—a compensation in joy for what she had renounced in satisfaction, and a foretaste of the mood of Heaven. The experience of glee, as she records it, is boundless : all distances collapse, and the soul expands to the very circumference of things. Here is how she put it in one of her letters : "Abroad is close tonight and I have but to lift my hands to touch the 'Heights of Abraham.' " And one of her gleeful poems begins :

'Tis little—I could care for Pearls—
Who own the ample sea—

How often she felt that way we cannot know, and it hardly matters. As Robert Frost has pointed out, happiness can make up in height for what it lacks in length ; and the important thing for us, as for her, is that she construed the experience as a divine gift. So also she thought of the power to write poetry, a power which, as we know, came to her often ; and poetry must have been the chief source of her sense of blessedness. The poetic impulses which visited her seemed "bulletins from Immortality", and by their means she converted all her losses into gains, and all the pains of her life to that clarity and repose which were to her the qualities of Heaven. So superior did she feel, as a poet, to earthly circumstance, and so strong was her faith in words, that she more than once presumed to view this life from the vantage of the grave. In a manner of speaking, she *was* dead. And yet her poetry, with its articulate faithfulness to inner and outer truth, its insistence on maximum consciousness, is not an avoidance of life but an eccentric mastery of it.

Q. 7. Emily Dickinson's "precision of vocabulary and condensed statement anticipated twentieth century". Discuss.

Or

Q. 8. "Meanings in miniatures". Does this phrase fairly describe Emily Dickinson's handling of words in her poetry ?

Or

Q. 9. Emily Dickinson "attempted to develop a shorthand system of poetic language which would combine the advantage of conciseness with the capability of connoting a rich complex of suggestions". Discuss.

Or

Q. 10. "The most evident characteristic of words, as far as Emily Dickinson was concerned, is their startling vitality". Do you agree ?

Or

Q. 11. In Emily Dickinson's poems there is "only the overpowering immediacy of the piercing word". Elaborate with illustrations.

Or

Q. 12. "The great problem is to get the sound of sense into words that must live alone". How does Emily Dickinson solve this problem in her poetry ?

Ans. Emily Dickinson was an instinctive artist. In her swift, breathless poems she found an instrument perfectly suited to her need, a form capable of containing with the utmost economy a single idea at a time. While Emerson was struggling to join "sentences like infinitely repellent particles" in the mosaic of his essays, thereby achieving an aesthetic *tour de force*, her hands grew deft in the finer "gem tactics" of her verse. She felt language in the round, making words convey implications that are more than the sum of their meanings laid end to end.

Her poems are hard, sharply defined, packed with meaning. She is more stark than the poets of the seventeenth century ; all extraneous luxuriance is stripped away. Perhaps this is the result of two centuries of Puritanism ; it is more probably the consequence of her own character and the personal renunciation which seems to have sharpened it. But she achieves, as the result of this bareness, an epigrammatic quality which her seventeenth-century prototypes frequently lack. She excels at definition, and many of her poems have an aphoristic pregnancy : like those dry Japanese flowers which blossom out when put in water, her condensed preservations of experience spread and expand in the reader's mind.

Emily Dickinson's poetry is as a rule a lyrical epigram, sudden, soon cut short, colloquial, celestial. It follows more or less the expectation of stanza-form and even of rhyme, but almost invariably in its rapid transit the greatest thoughts are expressed, or scenes created, with unusual decisions of accent and word. It is by her extraordinary, inexhaustible, and oracular control of words like hieroglyphs that Emily Dickinson prefects her poems. With an illusory easiness, even raggedness, she sends out each little squadron of verses to storm some formidable and complex-surrounded thought —and one, or two, or three of her phrases blow the trumpet that brings the walls crashing down.

I found the phrase to every thought
  I ever had, but one ;
And that defies me,—as a hand
  Did try to chalk the sun

To races nurtured in the dark ;—
  How would your own begin ?
Can blaze be done in cochineal,
  Or noon in mazarin ?

Language and communication exercised an almost hypnotic fascination over her ; the power of the individual word, in particular, seems to have inspired her with nothing less than reverence. Her constant practice of compiling a thesaurus of word choices for a single line is at least an indication that each word was a veritable dynamo of implication and associations.

The most evident characteristic of words, as far as Emily Dickinson was concerned, is their startling vitality. Her poems indicate that she regarded words as organic—separate little entities with a being, growth, and immortality of their own.

A word is dead
When it is said,
  Some say.
I say it just
Begins to live
  That day.

The life of the spoken word does not depend upon the duration of sound vibrations but is an inextricable part of the experience and being of the speaker and those to whom he speaks. Thus a word, no matter how simple, may be charged with imperishable significance because of its intimate relationship with human minds and souls. Connotations and symbolic extensions of meaning become inseparable from the word, so that its pronouncement will forever stimulate an entire "circumference" of meaning in addition to its denotative definition. In the following poem the idea of the immortality of words which are expressions of and inevitable associations with significant experience is clearly stated.

A little overflowing word
That any hearing had inferred
For ardour or for tears,
Though generations pass away,
Traditions ripen and decay,
As eloquent appears.

Eloquence, of course, did not mean for Emily Dickinson longwindedness, or unusual figures of speech, or any formal consideration ; it meant the effective thrust of meaning stripped of everything that might qualify, ornament, or weaken it. Much of her imagery chosen to describe the effect of a word upon him who hears it supports the contention that, for her, communication consisted in transmitting or perceiving an immediate, overpowering vision.

There is a word
Which bears a sword
Can pierce an armed man.
It hurls its barbed syllables,—
At once is mute again.

Communication is a *sword*. It *pierces*. *Barbed* syllables are *hurled*. There is no room here for slow comprehension, perception aided by illustration and analogy, and understanding based on a cautious consideration and analysis of a statement. There is only the overpowering immediacy of the piercing word. The sword imagery is elaborated in the following stanza :

She dealt her pretty words like blades,
As glittering they shone,
And every one unbared a nerve
Or wantoned with a bone.

Emily Dickinson testified that the concept of the "sword eloquence" of words was not a theoretical speculation for her, but was a personal, vivid reality. Consider, for example, how the sound of her lover's name affected her.

I got so I could hear his name
Without—
Tremendous gain !—
That stop-sensation in my soul,
And thunder in the room.

Eloquence, however, even in the sharpened sense in which she used the term, was not the real nature of words for Emily Dickinson. The Eloquence was only the flash of light a calm ocean surface reflects. Deeper than light penetrates there is the turbulance of an unseen tide. Words seemed to her to embody some terrifying, mysterious power which approached omnipotence. She knew that such power was not suspected by most people who ordinarily used words glibly and thoughtlessly. And she apparently believed that even she herself could only sense the existence of this power and never fully perceive its extent.

Could any mortal lip divine
 The undeveloped freight
Of a delivered syllable,
 'Twould crumble with the weight.

The power of words, while a great source of wonder and delight for her, was not regarded as wholly beneficial. No great power is entirely hazardless. "What a hazard an accent is! When I think of the hearts it has scuttled or sunk, I almost fear to lift my hand to so much as a punctuation." And in one poem she even compares words with malignant germs. She seems fascinated with the thought that words once expressed assume an existence of their own and can never be recalled by their "wrinkled author". In a letter she warns, "We must be careful what we say. No bird resumes its egg".

Emily Dickinson was concerned with language as an instrument for communication. Her capacity to perceive the significant and her desire to express her perceptions in poetic form made this concern inevitable. To a mind brimming with acute impressions, observations, and speculations, the ambiguity of ordinary language must have seemed intolerable. The evidence is clear that she gave great care to the evaluation of not only lines but the very syllables of each word. In this way she apparently hoped to achieve a skill in the use of language which would preclude ambiguity and verbosity. Hypothetically, we can trace the reasoning which led her to her unique way of using words. The tendency of human minds to interpret words in the light of their own prejudices, ignorances, and inclinations is easily apparent. Therefore the fewer words one used, the less opportunity he provided for misinterpretation--that is, if the words were chosen which in their denotative meanings and their connotative associations would most exactly convey one's intentions. Thus Emily Dickinson attempted to develop a shorthand system of poetic language which would combine the advantage of conciseness with the capability of connoting a rich complex of suggestions.

In conjunction with the development of a shorthand language arose an unshakable attachment to *frugality, economy, conciseness, reticence,* and *simplicity*. Any reader of the Dickinson poems will recognize these concepts as typical and often recurring themes. One suspects that she admired frugality not only for its usefulness in poetic communication but also as a compelling concept in itself. At any rate, her poems show *economy* to have been a constant watchword. Even a rat is described as having "concise" characteristics and as being "a foe so reticent". Valuable or awesome things—books, lover's words, nature, death—are all described in terms of frugality, simplicity, and reticence.

Emily Dickinson's organization of words as meanings, though sometimes a little difficult, a little too colloquial or not quite colloquial enough, appears to be decipherable in the usual way of prose. Her images are so familiar as to be barely visible or so strangely abstracted as to be almost transparent. And her first-time reader, often ends, not with a handful of poems, but with a handful of aphorisms such as : good comes from evil, having is taught by having not, suffering enriches. It is not by asserting meaning that meaningfulness grows heavy in Emily's poems. It is not by saying "I mean this" or "this means that". It is by holding the world itself, the aspect of the world, in those relations of the unrelated which poetry alone can manage.

It is not too much to say that in almost every poem she wrote, there are echoes of her sensitivity to the idiom of the Bible, and of her dependence upon its imagery for her own striking figures of speech. The great reservoir of classical myth she rarely drew upon. Since she never uses figures of speech for embellishment, she preferred those which for her had the power to evoke deep emotion. She found the Bible her key to meaning, and shaped her words and symbols by way of the stories and precepts in its reduceless mines.

Emily Dickinson must have been groping too for ways of expression that said things as she individually wished to say them. Certain of her idiosyncrasies in language and grammar become obtrusive when sprinkled too freely, but they are characteristic and often very effective. Her use of what seems to be the subjunctive mood comes first to mind. Yet the fact is that perhaps it is not subjunctive at all in the sense of being grammatically an optative or volitive or potential mood. "Only love assist the wound" may be read as "Only love can assist the wound." But more probably, because more in line with the way her mind worked, she means "Only love does assist the wound". If this is her meaning, then what at first seems to be a subjunctive mood might better be called a continuing or universal present indicative. She recognized her dilemma in the line "Beauty--be not caused—It is". As a suggested change she offers "is" for "be", as though she were uncertain whether the substantive sense was too unidiomatic to convey her idea clearly. But even the first reading cannot be called subjunctive, for it does not denote a contingency, but expresses an idea as fact. She was trying to universalize her thought to embrace past, present, and future. This concept of language is allied to but different from that which prompted her to cultivate elliptical phrases as a way of paring words that complete sentences grammatically but do not communicate. Of course on occasion she cut too deeply into the quick of her thought because she truncated her predication to the point where readers must perpetually grope for meaning. But where her intent is realized the attar becomes haunting and unforgettable.

Q. 13. "The contrasted seeds of mysticism and Stoicism took root in Emily's mind not only because of her own personality, but through a congenial ground prepared for them by romantic sensibility". Discuss and amplify.

Or

Q. 14. "Although she distrusted Romanticism, she was too shrewd to discard it altogether". How far does this statement apply to Emily Dickinson's practice as a poet ?

Or

Q. 15. "To her contacts with the Romantic Age she owed a small but very definite part of her artistic success". Do you agree ? Illustrate your answer with apt quotations.

Ans. In view of Emily Dickinson's total accomplishments she is neither a mystic nor a stoic poet, though she undeniably is both mystical and stoical. Neither can her total achievement be labelled or confined by such descriptive epithets as classical, romantic, or modern. In some degree answering to each specification, her total stature can best be described in the phrase shrewdly noted by her biographer : "this was a poet". Nevertheless for a rounded appreciation, of her art, recognition of its definitely romantic quality is essential, since no major aspect of her work can be properly grasped while others are disregarded. Her mind was integrated at least to the extent that such qualities as her peculiar mysticism and Stoicism are themselves properly explained only in the light of her romantic environment and soul.

Just as it is true that Emily remains far from wholly romantic, so it is clear that the whole of Romanticism in the historical sense is not to be traced in her own work. Singularly free from many of the qualities of her contemporaries or immediate predecessors, she has little specifically in common with the romantic poets, either of her own time of Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne, and Arnold, or the earlier period of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley. That she revolted from a Calvinistic training which she could never wholly forget, by no means makes her a follower of Byron, whose thought thus far, at least, followed hers. That she devoured Scott's tales, in no way allied her creative mind to the acknowledged master of the early nineteenth-century novel. She well knew that she followed her own star. Yet the popularity of her poems when first published, far surpassing the expectations of her editors and publishers, proves her to have been in some respects indigenous to her age. The woman who confessed that, whether with or against her will, she perforce saw "New Englandly", must have known that she also saw to some extent in the light of her age, coincident with the height of the Romantic Movement. Her conscious aims to retain the fresh imagination of childhood, to celebrate the self, to praise nature, and to indulge freely in fancy, stood among the most conspicuous ideals in the literature of her century. Although in the last analysis both her spirit and her style break violently with leading cultural patterns of the century, she was still its child, however naughty and rebellious. In no respect did she comply more closely than in cultivating the richest and most conspicuous vein in romantic thought as a whole, namely the new sensibility.

This sensibility is a mental state both in life and art accentuating the emotional life. Under circumstances which would at any time evoke strong feelings, romantic theory and practice made them still stronger; under conditions which would hardly be expected to elicit emotional responses at all, this sensibility begot an ample flow of sentiment. To the romantics, feeling became a badge of distinction, just as in the Restoration world "wit" was so regarded. Artifice became social practice, or, in Oscar Wilde's words, life imitated art. Soft phrases and melting airs grew to be marks of polite society. Virtually all men and women loved the poem or novel of sentiment. Sensibility was the cultural slogan of the age. Art and literature evolved into a vast hyperbole of passion ; effeminacy, or at best a literature more appropriate to the feminine boudoir than the masculine forum, gained ascendency ; sentimental cliches distorted style ; in time it grew even more fashionable to pity one's self than to pity the poor ; and, finally, with so many forced, affected, and abnormal attitudes disfiguring a fundamentally morbid society, neurotic elements tyrannized in art and poetry, and very nearly dominated all fields of aesthetic expression.

All these too-well-known qualities, for better and for worse, inevitably leave some marks on Emily Dickinson's verse. Though never sentimental to the degree of hypocrisy, nor extravagant to that of vulgarity, she utilizes her age for the best interests of her art, and occasionally commits the inevitable mistakes. In no other period, perhaps, could her writing have acquired such warmth; in none could it have fallen victim to the peculiar lapses which at times prevent it from attaining greatness.

Certain passages are the most conspicuous in betokening her romantic background. A number of her poems offer particularly apt illustration of the romantic tendency to indulge an hyperbole of emotionalism. "Dare you see a soul at the white heat ?" is, for example, a lyric admirably in key with its first line. There is a touch of self-consciousness here, not as yet precisely a weakness, but indicative of the true romantic spirit. Certain of Emily's verses show a keen awareness of the physical states of the body induced by extremes of nervous excitement. They are paralleled by her account of true poetry itself, which she identified as an experience making her "feel physically as though the top of my head were taken off". Her verse abounds in trembling, freezing, and burning. The following is indicative :

> It was not frost, for on my flesh
> I felt siroccos crawl,—
> Nor fire, for just my marble feet
> Could keep a chancel cool.

The verse of this tightly restrained New Englander contains many images drawn from volcanic fires. Significantly enough, volcanoes fascinated and haunted her. Their "reticent" ways, periodically giving place to violent irruption, paralleled her own experiences and the behaviour of her friends and family.

> A crater I may contemplate,
> Vesuvius at home.

Although some of her most moving love poems are majestically impersonal, or, in other words, come nearer to Sappho or Dante than to Browning or Tennyson, a number by no means of her least impressive pieces are stamped with marks of peculiarly romantic sensibility. One of her best known lyrics, "Although I put away his life", is very much in Mrs. Browning's equally sentimental and realistic manner. Emily dreams of a connubial happiness that has failed to be realized. She might have been the faithful and devoted servant of a husband, sowing the flowers he preferred, soothing his pains, pushing pebbles from his path, playing his favourite tunes, or fetching him his slippers. The more fanciful of her love hyperboles also tend to follow current patterns. One of her longest lyrics, "I cannot live with you", proves a more concise version of the romantic theme of love and immortality as handled in Rossetti's *Blessed Damosel.* Emily vividly describes her own sensitivity in language unmistakably romantic, as when she asks the rhetorical question why a bird at daybreak

> Should stab my ravished spirit
> With dirks of melody.

After the unabashed fashion of romantic poets, Emily at times unhesitatingly exposes the more neurotic features of her personality. Such writing falls into the emphatically self-conscious romantic idiom. With powerful imagery she describes the gingerly walk of the neurotic genius through the terrifying jungle of experience : "I stepped from plank to plank." She discloses the painful tensions within the pathological soul. In one poem, "The body grows outside", she describes the soul as hiding behind the flesh. In another, "Me from Myself to banish", she reveals the agonies of the split personality, pains of which she must herself have been poignantly aware. Briefly, at least, she probes the tragic abyss of her own sub-conscious : "The sub-terranean freight, The cellars of the soul." In a tragic poem, "Had we our senses", she suggests that men would become even madder if they saw clearly into their own madness. Sanity is merely the integument of an invincible stupidity. Baudelaire himself could have proposed no more cynical a view.

These various romantic attitudes Emily shares and explores, without as a rule falling victim to the typical banalities of her times, either in meaning or expression. In other words, her poetry shares the deeper and grander qualities of her chief contemporaries without sinking for any length of time into the commonplaces of romantic thought, sentiment, and style. In this regard it becomes appropriate to note a few instances in which her language or her images come close to losing the sharpness and distinction of her own literary personality. "Glee! the great storm is over!" for instance, approximates the style of the typical, undistinguished romantic ballad. The rhymes are commonplace: "land-sand"; "souls-shoals"; "door-more"; "eye-reply." The meter is painfully regular. The symbols of sailors shipwrecked or saved hardly achieve distinction. Longfellow himself might have written the final line : 'And only the waves reply." The poem has a saving irony which is Emily's own and preserves it from bathos; but it remains extremely romantic. Another lyric, "Good night ! which put the candle out?" is comprised of a series of all too-familiar romantic images drawn from home or the sea. In still another, 'Forever cherished be the tree", the image of two robins as two angels has the customary nineteenth-century extravagance with little assurance of Emily's better genius. In short, to her contacts with the Romantic Age she owed a small but very definite part of her artistic success ; and much the greater part of her by no means fatal faults. Her devotion to "eternity" may have been due in part to a distrust, at times latent and at times highly conscious, of the dominating fashions of her times. Although she distrusted Romanticism, she was too shrewd to discard it altogether.

Q. 16. Emily Dickinson was a recluse. What stamp of this fact do you find on the theme and range of her poems ?

Or

Q. 17. Write a brief essay on Emily Dickinson as a poet of alienation and disintegration.

Or

Q. 18. "Confusion and order are the polarities of Emily Dickinson's world view". Discuss with reference to the poems read by you.

Or

Q. 19. "Emily Dickinson's physical seclusion was a sign of her emotional and psychological withdrawal". What evidence of this withdrawal do you find in her poetry ?

Or

Q. 20. Emily Dickinson "did not reject life in its more permanent aspect ; she withdrew in order to apprehend it more fully and with greater concentration of purpose". Do you agree ?

Ans. Emily Dickinson's physical seclusion was a sign of her emotional and psychological withdrawal ; but in the spirit of Thoreau's boast that he had "travelled a good deal in Concord", she proclaimed "Area—no test of depth", and manifested the universality of her narrow experience by weaving the names of foreign and far away places into her tight verses. Within her chosen and preappointed limits she made poems which are astonishing for their range and intensity and for their experiments in language—in short, for their enactment of the individual drama of consciousness. Thoreau could almost have had her in mind when he wrote : "How much is there in simply seeing !... The woman who sits in the house and *sees* is a match for a stirring captain. Those still, piercing eyes, as faithfully exercised on their talent, will keep her even with Alexander or Shakespeare. They may go to Asia with parade, or to fairyland, but not beyond her ray."

The question 'Why Emily Dickinson withdrew' has elicited different answers from different critics. But the most convincing is that which depends both on her own explanation and her poetry. She made several poignant references to an illustration in *Harper's* which is entitled "Tired of the World". A concerned grandmother asks a wistful child, "Why, what's the matter with my Pet ?" The child answers, hand pressed to mouth : "Why, Grandma, after giving the subject every consideration, I have come to the conclusion that—the World is Hollow, and my Doll is stuffed with Sawdust, so—I—should—like—if you please, to be a Nun ?" Studies of Emily Dickinson have already made much—too much, in fact—of her trembling rejection of a false and hollow world. As a matter of fact, for all the truth of that point, the world was often not too insubstantial for her but too substantial.

It is apparent that Emily Dickinson became a hermit by deliberate and conscious choice. "A recluse", wrote Higginson, "by temperament and habit, literally spending years without setting her foot beyond the doorstep, and many more years during which her walks were strictly limited to her father's grounds, she habitually concealed her mind, like her person, from all but a very few friends." We may also be sure that her voluntary hermitage was not due to any "love-disappointment," and that she was "not an invalid." She had tried society and the world, and had found them lacking. Of the fact that she suffered acutely from intellectual drought, there is evidence enough. She appears to have existed in a vacuum. One must assume that she found in her immediate environment no one of her own stature, with whom she could admit or discuss such things ; that she lacked the energy or effrontery to voyage out into the unknown in search of such companionship ; and that lacking this courage, and wanting this help, she became easily a prey to the then current Emersonian doctrine of mystical individualism. In this connection it is permissible to suggest that her extreme self-seclusion and secrecy was both a protest and a display—a kind of vanity masquerading as modesty. She became increasingly precious, of her person as of her thought.

What James Reeves says of her withdrawal seems still more true. That she took to dressing in white and refused to see callers except by proxy, through her sister, was part of the drama she played as a setting for her inner life. Legends of her eccentricity have been made much of, but in fact it was largely of a negative sort: it is no tso much that she performed unconventional acts as that she refused to take part in convention.. She remained in some degree childlike not because of a psychopathic infantilism, but because the retention of innocence or naivete was an essential condition of poetic integrity. She was not the only poet to maintain such a belief. Allen Tate remarks : "All pity for Miss Dickinson's 'starved life' is misdirected. Her life was one of the richest and deepest ever lived on this continent. When she went upstairs and closed the door, she mastered life by rejecting it." This is well said, if by 'life' we understand the conventional round of small-town preoccupations. But she did not reject life in its more permanent aspect ; she withdrew in order to apprehend it more fully and with greater concentration of purpose. We need not, indeed, pity her 'starved life', but we may sympathise with her loneliness, which she overcame, not by indulging in self-pity, but by intellectualizing it in her characteristically paradoxical mode.

It might be lonelier
Without the loneliness

She did not withdraw from the world because she hated it : there was nothing in her of the grand romantic manner, rejecting society because the palate had become jaded. Her isolation was a calculated choice, the loss weighed against the gain, with a clear conviction of the necessity and worth of what she had to do. She had lived for thirty years in Amherst, learning what she could of the world, reading and thinking, and above all, drawing all the inspiration and comfort she could from the friendships she cultivated so lovingly. Once she had renounced marriage in the accepted sense, there was no new experience which the world could offer.

The soul selects her own society,
Then shuts the door.
To her divine majority
Present no more.

She chose to live each day out in the presence of all that thought, memory, letters, and the immensity of nature could give her, without any of the distractions of casual intercourse, or any of the alleviations it might offer from the everpressing burden of her own identity.

Adventure most unto itself
The soul condemned to be,
Attended by a single hound,
Its own identity.

When Higginson questioned her about her seclusion, she wrote : "Of 'shunning men and women',—they talk of hallowed things, aloud, and embarrass my dog. He and I don't object to them, if they'll exist their side. I think Carlo would please you, he is dumb, and brave." Those she selected for her friends were to her peculiarly alive; the rest she could scarcely understand. 'So few that live have life', she wrote to Samuel Bowles, one of her most cherished friends. And again to Higginson : "I find ecstasy in living ; the mere sense of living is joy enough. How do most people live without any thoughts ? There are many people in the world,—you must have noticed them in the streets,—how do they live ? How do they get strength to put on their clothes in the morning ?"

It was the quotidian sanity of the world around her which Emily found oppressive.

Much madness is divinest sense
To a discerning eye—
Much sense the starkest madness.
'Tis the majority
In this, as all, prevail.
Assent and you are sane ;
Demur, you're straightway dangerous
And handled with a chain.

Or, as she expressed it in a letter, 'Insanity to the sane seems so unnecessary.'

Emily Dickinson's mental processes began with an intolerable sense of emptiness which drove her to project as concrete evidence of her incompleteness the loss of childhood, father, mother, lover. She could list childhood and the dead among the "Things that never can come back" ; she could even enumerate the things lost with childhood. But in all honesty she had to add : "But is that all I have lost—memory drapes her Lips." These losses—genuine and heartfelt—were at least definable and hence bearable, but what seemed excruciating was the fact that almost the first act of the mind was an awareness of isolation. Edwards would have attributed this knowledge to original sin, and Emerson to the separation of the object from the Oversoul. But Emily Dickinson's was a characteristically personal response : all she knew was that she had to manage somehow from day to day, eating and sleeping and speaking and acting in the hollowness of the void :

A loss of something ever felt I—
The first that I could recollect
Bereft I was—of what I knew not

The poem does not specify what was lost ; all she could say was that she was bereft of something in and of herself, something so private that it belonged to her as an individual and would make her, as she was not now, a whole person.

I cannot buy it—'tis not sold—
There is no other in the World—
Mine was the only one

Before anything—faith, love, happiness were possible, before she could give or take or act, the unknown factor had somehow to be found :

If I could find it Anywhere
I would not mind the journey there
Though it took all my store

[illegible] began with a quest through an interior waste, trackless and guideless without even the name of the missing treasure. She could call it what she would—friend, lover, mother, father, "Golden Fleece", God—but these names could never contain the dark immensity of "Missing All". Life began with "Missing All"; and its trek through time seemed a dreary repetition of losses, of missing in turn each of the things most dear, until "Parting is all we know of heaven,/ And all we need of hell." In this private hell the lonely mourner "walked among the children." But even Satan had soon found that hell had its own compensations—the stimulus to yearn and struggle and resist. And in her own way Emily Dickinson came to draw sustenance from the substance of her sorrow. "I always try to think in any disappointment that had I been gratified, it had been sadder still, and I weave from such suppositions, *at times*, considerable consolation; consolation upside down as I am pleased to call it." "Consolation upside down" gave way sometimes to a brighter possibility: "To miss you, Sue, is power";/"Possession—has a sweeter chink/ Upon a Miser's Bar." Nor was she seeking solace in futile paradox; she was stating, flatly and deliberately, her recognition of the only grounds on which life without delusion was possible: "The stimulus of Loss makes most Possession mean."

How could loss be power beyond possession? Because loss made us desire, made us project an object of our desire, made us strain urgently towards it. What we lacked we wanted, and if we lacked all, we wanted all. Fulfilment was static, like eternity; but desire was a process, and was therefore the prerequisite and condition of human life. At times, even, desire found response; for a moment we glimpsed what we wanted to see, grasped what we wanted to hold. Afterwards, these fleeting moments of fulfilment provided the stimulus for the continuation of the process. Although we know that possession "Is past the instant/ We achieve the Joy," We can accept life for the memory of past moments, the ecstasy of the present, the anticipation of the future:

> Satisfaction—is the Agent
> Of Satiety—
> Want—a quiet Comissary
> For Infinity.

In other words, man's littleness was, in a strange way, the condition of his greatness, and his limitations pointed him towards infinity.

Confusion and *order* are the polarities of Emily Dickinson's world view. They inform her poetry, shape her style, enter into the basic themes to which she repeatedly returns. Out of the conflict between them, there arise the anxieties that overspread her work. And there emerges as well from this conflict her elaborate moral science.

Confusion is an observed fact. Or rather it is *the* fact, since confusion is, for Emily Dickinson, the essential condition of every experience. Looking to the world she dwells in, Emily perceives a bewildering [illegible] Time, change, the physical and mental deterioration of the self: these are her eternal mysteries. The delusive gift, the unlooked-for bereavement, the surprising intrusion, the sudden betrayal, the abrupt looming of a new threat to security: these constitute daily shocks which she has no power to comprehend. Yet, mysterious though themselves are, the events point to a mystery that is still greater than themselves. So regular is their appearance, so steady the rhythm of suffering which they evoke that they seem the effects of some dim and indecipherable Cause. This is no aimless succession which Emily Dickinson beholds. Rather it is (or at least appears to be) a strangely determined flow. On the surface, all is confusion and mere sequence. But there are constant hints that beneath surface a Plan exists, a governing principle which the surface of experience simply represents.

Order would come with the discovery of that principle. To find order would be to understand how and why experience works, and what the significance of experience might be. This is Emily Dickinson's dream. Her lifelong quest was to establish coherence in a Humpty-Dumpty world. She wished to reach outside the dense welter of experiences, to grasp their Plan, and thereby to transform more sequence into an orderly, a predictable, above all, an intelligible pattern. But her wish was balked by the manner in which experience presented itself. Asking for answers, Emily Dickinson had no recourse except to confront the riddle again. With each new confrontation, her craving for order was dashed by the onrush of confusions. In the maze before her, she found veiled clues, but nothing definite to seize hold of. Mobility gave her no fixed starting point, from where the search for coherence could begin.

Thus an irremediable cleavage separates the fact, which is the ambiguous flowing, from the ideal, which is the dream of mastering the flowing intellectually. Faced by the conflict, Emily Dickinson is aroused to philosophical speculation. Why is it—she asks, in effect—that her love of arrangement, her taste of harmony, her commitment to decorum, are left perpetually unfulfilled? Why, when she is consigned to a world that obscures her vision, does she still hunger to see things from the standpoint of Eternity? Why, in a word, has she been created to suffer—and to suffer most acutely because there is never an adequate explanation for the ordeal?

The possibility that confusion results from personal sin, is a possibility that Emily Dickinson only mentions—and immediately rejects. She dismisses it for the simple reason that the idea strikes her as wholly preposterous. She feels no guilt. Contriteness or the vague sense of having been naughty: these are parts of her emotional equipment. The experience of outright depravity, however, is something completely foreign to her. To assume guilt is to raise the unanswerable question: guilty of what? To accept the need for atonement is to broach the equally absurd dilemma: how shall I atone, when I have no clear understanding of what it is that I am atoning for? Consequently, the association of suffering with sin, or of knowledge with redemption, [illegible] Dickinson. Deprived of this more or less orthodox solution to the problem, Emily Dickinson has only one remaining alternative to which she can turn. If she is not guilty, then God must be. Since she has done nothing to earn the confusions of life, they must, necessarily, have been imposed upon her by a malicious Jehovah. The thought gives her no pleasure. She resists it with a will, and arrives at it only after she has been driven to a corner where no other explanation will work. Nevertheless, it stands as a recurring idea in a large number of her poems.

No art can be adequately understood apart from the artist. Emily Dickinson is the best commentary upon her verse. When Ella Gilbert Ives visited the house where Emily Dickinson was born and died, she "ceased to wonder that Emily shut herself in behind that austere but tonic hemlock hedge, and made her house a nunnery." Commenting on the quality of Emily Dickinson's poetry, she further observes : "Her perception is at times as vivid as if, called to die, she were taking a last look. Deep and powerful are the strokes with which she limns an emotion, as she were standing at a judgment bar. If the adjective "intense" were not so overworked, I should employ it. Had Emily Dickinson written novels they would have had the Brontean quality—flame. A friend tells me that during the later years of her life the poet was accustomed to keep a candle burning in her window at night for the belated traveller. It is symbolic of her genius."

It is the brevity and searching quality of Emily Dickinson's poetry that renders it unique, and augurs permanence, not so much that it lights the pathway, as that it explores the heart and touches the quick of experience. Her verse is never didactic, yet always earnest ; too serious for wit, yet having the very kernel of wit—surprise—to an extraordinary degree. This dressing up of the primal emotions in strange, often outlandish garb, or exhibiting them naked yet not ashamed, has a singular effect, and throws the mind back with questioning upon the writer herself, and the influences that made her what she was—the loneliest figure in the world of letters :

There is a solitude of space,
    A solitude of sea,
A solitude of death, but these
    Society shall be,
Compared with that profounder site,
    That polar privacy,
A Soul admitted to Itself :
    Finite Infinity.

Q. 21. "Time and change proved peculiarly disturbing to Emily Dickinson because she regarded them as autonomous processes which belied —or at least concealed —every fixed principle except their own autonomy". Discuss with reference to the poems read by you.

Or

Q. 22. "Out of her aversion to time and change, there emerge the darkest moments in Emily Dickinson's poetry". Do you agree ?

Or

Q. 23. "The real problem of the momentous transition lies, precisely, in the metaphysical uncertainties which time and change are constantly occasioning". Discuss Emily Dickinson's time poetry in the light of this observation.

Or

Q. 24. "In the time poetry, the movement of the momentous transition is always towards the negative : towards darkness, Fall, or the dissipation of light". Discuss with reference to Emily Dickinson's poetry.

Or

Q. 25. "Clocks and hours, days, months, and seasons, the images and the increments of time : these are Emily Dickinson's harbingers of woe". Amplify.

Ans. Emily Dickinson yearned to assume that, despite any evidence to the contrary, there was an underlying pattern in human experiences, which gave to the experiences both coherence and meaning. The "modest needs" to which she refers in one of her poems were, fundamentally, the needs for conviction : conviction that life was somehow purposive ; that suffering and death could be justified ; above all, that death itself was no more than the prelude to personal immortality. Experience, unfortunately, declined to accommodate. When Emily Dickinson looked to the actual, tangible world around her, it was to discover that the pattern which she craved was forever dissolving into a ceaseless flow of time and change. When she surveyed life, as life could be known, she found no system and no gradation—and no trace of God in his benevolent majesty. She was greeted instead by whirl and mutability, by the uninterrupted scattering and steady vanishing away of all experiences. Time and change proved peculiarly disturbing to her because she regarded them as autonomous processes which belied—or at least concealed—every fixed principle except their own autonomy. In the sheer, relentless flowing of details, Emily saw a denial to her devout wish for harmony and stasis. Her sense of helplessness lay in the fact that she was everywhere surrounded by motion—and could find nothing *beyond* or *above* or even *within* the motion which be said to elucidate its whirl, or to invest the whirling with a moral point and purpose.

Stated thus abstractedly, her dilemma will seem akin to one that is fairly traditional in philosophy. Certainly the crux of the matter was not new. The difficulties of reconciling Divine Constancy with empirical temporality have been both ancient and continuing as the long history of the problem, from Heraclitus to the poetry of T.S. Eliot, will indicate. For Emily Dickinson, however, the traditional problem of time was complicated by a still further feature : a feature very possibly unique with her, but one which, in any case, became the darkest component in her tragic view of life. Where the typical Heraclitian sees time only as a negative quality, sees it as a distraction or confusion that man is hard-pressed to overcome—Emily Dickinson placed temporality and mutability in a rather more sinister light. She glimpsed in each the workings of a positive and dynamic evil. Hemmed in by these forces and loathing them, Emily Dickinson could only imagine them to be deadly personal enemies ; she could only portray them as if they were actors in a conspiracy, planned against herself. In her universe, either time and change seem to be absolute masters, who delight in baffling, whose aim it is to blot out the basis for ultimate understanding. Or, still more dreadfully, they seem the instruments of a malign God—a Deity who cloaks himself with the time process, which He uses to withhold answers from his creatures. Cast in either role, time prevents knowledge of the Timeless. The terror of the situation is that, whichever role time plays, the preventions seem conscious and wilful and maliciously contrived.

Once we have realized how her desire for stability came into conflict with her awareness that all seems chaos, we possess the likeliest key to Emily's seclusion, seeing that it was not a married man who compelled her to flight, but rather fear of change and a desire to keep her door closed on the trouble-some and time-ridden world outside. We can also proceed from her obsessions with time to the starkest of Emily Dickinson's poetic themes. It is when what she calls "Time's wily chargers" accost her that Emily writes most powerfully, most openly, and, therefore, with the least reliance upon ironic indirection.

Out of her aversion to time and change, there emerge the darkest moments in Emily Dickinson's poetry : her portraits of death, her doubts concerning immortality, her analyses of pain and love and evil, her delineations of the dreaded invasion and of the periodic molestations which the self undergoes. The fact of her aversion to time and change may be illustrated from her poems like "Presentiment—is that long Shadow—on the Lawn", "Further in Summer than the Birds", and "A Light exists in Spring". The theme of all three poems is that of "the momentous transition". In each case, we are in the midst of change—change which is a product of time's machinations and which, as we watch, is gradually being imposed by time upon the images in the landscape. The overall effect of the poetry is to enlarge beyond the particular shift, until change, and the temporal processes which wrought it, are made to seem a relentless ritual, a kind of slipperiness and evanescence which must be felt as universal qualities. The second and third of the above mentioned poems present change as inherently terrifying, because mutability is at once "an inexplicable fact" and yet the basic and essential component of every human experience. For, the real problem of the momentous transition lies, precisely, in the metaphysical uncertainties which time and change are constantly occasioning. The combination of bafflement and despair that permeates the writing does not spring exclusively from the poet's vision of the changing world as an observable fact, a series of strictly natural phenomena. It derives, mainly, from the way in which this shifting, changing world seems intent on harassing the poet, on blocking her off from understanding on separating her from any fixed point outside its own mobility.

The notion that time is a Power—a Power at once ponderous and yet terrifyingly impalpable—is still further magnified by the stress, in all three poems, upon the sheer inexorability of temporal sequence. In the first poem the arrogance of time is suggested by the lofty *notice* that darkness gives. The same air of relentlessness is introduced into the second poem through the use of ceremonial words—words like *Custom* and *Mass* and *Druidic*—to convey the facts of change. In the third poem the steady, inflexible passage of time—the stepping of Horizons or the brisk reporting away of Noons—contributes, once again, to an identical mood. The consequence of this sort of language is one of investing temporality with a distinctively ceremonial guise. Emily Dickinson shows time and change beating down upon the human observer in the form of a grim, remorseless, and overbearing ritual.

The tendency of Emily Dickinson's time poetry is to conceive of time as a veil; one drawn tightly and firmly between the human observer and the stability for which she craves. Where the observer asks for intuitions of Eternity, time and change show her only beginnings and ends. Where she yearns to feel at home in the universe, time poses a problem that leaves her the perpetual outsider, involved in temporal processes but with no understanding of what they mean. The further implication is that a kind of demonic strategy underlies time's behaviour, so that time's blotting out of ultimate values is an entirely self-conscious activity.

In the time poetry, the movement of the momentous transition is always towards the negative : towards darkness in the first poem above, towards Fall in the second, towards the dissipation of light in the third, towards some similar condition in virtually every time poem that Emily Dickinson ever wrote. To her, time represents the great betrayer. Moving stealthily and with deadly coherence, temporal sequence manages to disrupt stability, to destroy any and all ideas of permanence, and to thwart man's search for the grounds of certitude. In addition to playing an anti-metaphysical role, time is also thought of as imposing the agonies and brutalities of actual experience. Clocks and hours, days, months, and seasons, the images and the increments of time : these are Emily Dickinson's harbingers of woe.

There is very little of the nostalgic effect anywhere in Emily Dickinson. The enigma that preoccupies her is far less *where are* ? than *what barbarous thing is to be ?* It is scarcely ever to the ruined past that she addresses her laments ; she speaks them over the onrushing future : over the moment to come, and all the unlovely destinations towards which the new moment promises to drive her. The result is that for the charming and yet flaccid reflections of *ubi-sunt* poetry, Emily Dickinson substitutes tense dramas of disintegration, an atmosphere of hushed foreboding, a sense of the brittleness in all existent forms and of their terrible vulnerability to time's intrusions. Temporality, as she depicts it, is almost never a topic for the backward glance, the fond lingering, the glamorous meditation. Rather, the time theme calls forth a poetry in which the details are crisp and electrifying, while the accompanying emotions are those of pain, shock, and suspense, and the utmost in fear and anguish.

Immersion in time is, for Emily Dickinson, not simply a matter of contemplating diurnal changes or the rotating seasons. The true consequence of the immersion—a consequence consistently expressed through the symbol of the poetry—is to be reminded of blemishes on the *moral* landscape. It is to have brought home to one the facts of death, madness, and incoherence, the realizations of human finitude and the oppressive silence of God. And more : it is to perceive that because time seems to move always in the same direction, there can be no mitigating the time ceremony, no real chance for relief or restoration—in short, no way of escape from the worst conditions that time imposes.

So, with time and its dark necessities, we reach areas of her experience about which Emily Dickinson was frankly and fatally compelled to care. Every detail in her life indicates that, following 1859, she was dedicated to nothing less than stopping the clock—to locating a sanctuary where mutability and its horrors could never again intrude. But even as the gestures were made, she had to see their futility. To shrink from the clock was merely to discover that clocks tick as callously in bedrooms as in the market place. The more Emily Dickinson sought to ignore and evade temporality, the more engulfed she became in the complex mysteries of time.

Q. 26. In *A Light Exists in Spring* "seasonal change is employed as the concrete symbol of the moral change". Explain it and discuss whether the lyric is an allegory or just a case of Pathetic Fallacy.

Or

Q. 27 In *A Light Exists in Spring* "the intense dramatic impact is largely a result of our perception that the passing of light is portrayed as small sign of the still larger impermanence which exists always and everywhere and on a cosmic scale". Discuss.

Or

Q. 28. *A Light Exists in Spring* "presents change as inherently terrifying, because mutability is 'an inexplicable fact' and

yet the basic and essential component of every human experience". Amplify.

Or

Q. 29. *A Light Exists in Spring* **"deals with the inexplicable fact of change, of the absolute cleavage between successive states of being..." Examine critically.**

Ans. Emily Dickinson's three poems which combine her greatest power with her finest execution are strangely on much the same theme, both as regards the idea embodied and as regards the allegorical embodiment. They deal with the inexplicable fact of change, of the absolute cleavage between successive states of being, and it is not unnatural that in two of the poems this theme should be related to the theme of death. The three poems are—"A Light Exists in Spring", "As Imperceptibly as Grief", and "There's certain Slant of Light". In each poem, seasonal change is employed as the concrete symbol of the moral change. This is not the same thing as the so-called pathetic fallacy of the romantics, the imposition of a personal emotion upon a physical object incapable either of feeling such an emotion or of motivating it in a human being. It is rather a legitimate and traditional form of allegory, in which the relationships between the items described resemble exactly the relationships between certain moral ideas or experiences ; the identity of relationship evoking simultaneously and identifying with each other the feelings attendant upon both series as they appear separately.

A Light Exists in Spring deals with March, the pivot of the new year, when spring transforms the cold, barren winter. Spring's hope is compared to a rarely glimpsed light which carries regal and religious associations to signify the psychological insights that occur at such a moment. Coming as influx of grace, this illumination heightens man's emotional awareness of spring's mysteries and enlarges his poignant sense of estrangement. The "light" image of the first stanza, with its suggestions of purity and freshness, is enriched by these lines :

A Colour stands abroad
On Solitary Fields
That Science cannot overtake

Here the colour, unlike the molten gold of summer or the mellow red of autumn, remains indefinite, standing regally aloof. The quality of this experience is neither rational nor pragmatic ; even science fails to comprehend it. The middle stanzas examine the light's mystical aspect, which reaches "upon the furthest Slope" known to man, into the depths of the human soul. A military conceit changes this solemn tone by describing the light's disappearance with humorous precision. In the final stanza the poet states the significance of the experience, emphasizing its religious value and the desolation that follows its [illegible]

A quality of loss
Affecting our Content
As Trade had suddenly encroached
Upon a Sacrament

The return of reality, harshly phrased as "Trade", typifies the proceedings of a large impersonal company interested only in measurable gain and unconcerned about religious intangibles. The moment's sacramental aspects, displaying God's grace and power, are now lost. Throughout the poem, motion and light images are constantly interwoven to suggest the longing and awe that the light brings. Thus the physical experience of an early spring day is transformed into a moment of moral and religious illumination.

The effect of time and change is another important theme that emerges from this poem. We feel while reading the poem that we are in the midst of change—change which is a product of time's machinations and which, as we watch, is gradually being imposed by time upon the images in the landscape. The overall effect of the poetry is to enlarge beyond the particular shift, until change, and the temporal processes which wrought it, are made to seem a relentless ritual, a kind of slipperiness and evanescence which must be felt as universal qualities. In the present poem the intense dramatic impact is largely a result of our perception that the passing of light is portrayed here merely as small sign of the still larger impermanence which exists always and everywhere and on a cosmic scale. As Yvor Winters has said, the poem presents change as inherently terrifying because mutability is at once 'an inexplicable fact' and yet the basic and essential component of every human experience.

In this poem, phrase upon important phrase indicates the philosophical drift of the poetry—and suggests that just as the particular movement is made to symbolize movement-in-general, so movement-in-general becomes a horrifying spectacle by epitomizing for the poet everything that is ambiguous and unaccountable in the universe which confronts her. Let us now see the circumstances recounted in the poem. Here, as the last word implies, a change on the landscape must be associated with the speaker's loss of spiritual fulfilment. When the light goes out, the speaker is deprived of a *Sacrament*—is robbed, in other words, of the joy which might have come through some sort of spiritual communion. Not only are time and change seen as being directly responsible for her loss ; in the conduct of these two forces, we are made to feel them as deliberately malevolent, as treacherous forces which express, through their every action, a profound contempt for the human observer's need. The verb *encroach* shows this. Implying trespass or infringement, it points up the extent to which temporal experiences gladly, and even eagerly, impose themselves between the speaker and her quest for communion. When the light is taken away without the *Formula* (that is, without the remedy or the alleviation) *of Sound*, this fact emphasizes, in another way, the cruelties of experience. It draws attention to the intense mystery of time's behaviour, and so begets in the speaker a sense of something unfathomably strange in what has happened to her and to her landscape. Taken together, then, the ideas of an *encroachment* and of *silence* get exactly at the attitude towards time which Emily Dickinson regularly developed. They describe a Power which first robs the human observer of contentment, then goes on to compound the injury by providing her with no clues through which the deprivation might be understood. This notion that time is a Power—a Power at once ponderous and yet terrifyingly impalpable—is still further magnified by the stress upon the sheer inexorability of temporal sequence represented in the poem by the stepping of Horizons and the brisk reporting away of Noons.

Emily Dickinson was a product of the New England tradition of moral Calvinism ; her dissatisfaction with her tradition led to her questioning most of its theology and discarding much of it, and led to her reinterpreting some of it, one would gather, in the direction of a more nearly Catholic Christianity. Her acceptance of Christian moral concepts was unimpaired, and the moral tone of her character remained immitigably Calvinistic in its hard and direct simplicity. As a result of this Calvinistic temper, she lacked the lightness and grace which might have enabled her to master minor themes ; she sometimes stepped without hesitation into obscurantism, both verbal and metaphysical. But also as a result of it, her best poetry represents a moral adjustment to certain major moral problems which are carefully defined.

Q. 30. "Despite her affinities with the transcendentalists and the metaphysicals, and the imagists, and the modernists, Emily Dickinson belongs to no school and has no followers". Elaborate with references and illustrations.

Or

Q. 31. "Emily Dickinson shares the appeal of poets who create their own techniques, moulding language to the requirements of their personal voice without regard to literary convention". Discuss.

Or

Q. 32. "Emily Dickinson wrote, as if nobody had written poetry before her". Amplify and illustrate.

Ans. Emily Dickinson's poetry has a luxuriance of meaning and an intensity of vision owing to which it often has invited comparison with the Transcendentalists and Metaphysicals, with the Imagists and Moderns. But though to some extent all these parallels hold good, the fact remains that the poetry of Emily Dickinson has a uniqueness of its own. Reduced to its bare essentials, it defies all comparisons and shows us at its core something which can only be called "Dickinsonian". A careful reading of Emily Dickinson's poem does not take long to convince the reader that Emily Dickinson had no masters and she left no disciples.

Let us now examine, one by one, her links with each of the above mentioned movements : the Transcendentalists, the Metaphysicals, the Imagists, and the Moderns. It is only after that that we shall be in a position to examine Emily Dickinson's uniqueness as a poet. To take the Transcendentalism first. The *Weltanschauung* which Emily Dickinson inherited may be loosely described as Transcendentalist or, better yet, as Emersonian. It included views more extensive than those of Emerson, reaching as they did into the work of Whitman, Thoreau, and certain of the English Romantics. But the views crystallized around an elaborate and widespread theory of man's relations with God and Nature. What, in general, they said was this. Nature is benevolent, compassionate, kindly disposed toward the individual. With a right good will, she snuggles up to man, permitting him to use her for his profit and instruction, allowing him to read with ease her deepest and inmost meanings. Furthermore, Nature is laden with a spiritual significance, which, again, she gladly yields up to the perceptive human observer. Starting with the visible facts of experience, the observer discovers that the phenomena overlay symbolic clues. Pursuing the clues, he is free to rise above them until, in a moment of supreme ecstasy, he stands face to face with Nature's Cause, who may be God, or the Oversoul, or the Great Camerado, or simply the Creative Fountain.

Emily Dickinson matured under the influence of this outlook. Inevitably, these doctrines were engrained into her thinking and became major parts of her intellectual equipment. At the same time, however, it is equally evident that her place is on the outer fringes of Transcendentalism rather than at its vital centre. By the late 1850's, when her first poetry was written, the crest of the Transcendentalist movement—the ebullient mood of thirty or even ten years earlier—had, in large measure, commenced to wane. Hastening this historical deterioration was Emily Dickinson's own temperament, a temperament which made her skeptical of all ebullience, and, in particular, led her to question the brighter side of Transcendentalist thinking. The result is that Emily Dickinson is best conceived of as a post-Emersonian, or, still more accurately perhaps, as a sort of Emersonian-in-reverse. Inheriting all the basic expectations of Transcendentalism, she found they could give rise to pain and disillusionment quite as readily as to the bland assurances of Concord. Possessing the "knife in the brain"—the will to know, the passionate desire for certitude—which Emerson bequeathed to New England youth, she found the knife had an edge and a power to mutilate that were far more dangerous than anything Emerson himself had ever visualized. Probably the term which will most effectively describe Emily Dickinson is the term "marginal writer". It is meant to imply an artist who still belongs to a specific literary tradition, yet who is prevented by time, by circumstance, and by disposition from sharing the convictions by which that tradition had once been characterized.

Neither the feeling nor the style of Emily Dickinson belongs to the seventeenth century Metaphysicals ; yet between her and Donne there are remarkable ties. Their religious ideas, their abstractions, are momently toppling from the rational plane to the level of perception. The ideas, in fact, are no longer the impersonal religious symbols created anew in the heat of emotion, that we find in poets like Herbert and Vaughan. They have become, for Donne, the terms of personality ; they are mingled with the miscellany of sensation.

In Emily Dickinson, as in Donne, we may detect a singularly morbid concern, not for religious truth, but for personal revelation. The modern word is self-exploitation. It is egoism grown irresponsible in religion and decadent in morals. In religion it is blasphemy ; in society it means usually that culture is not self-contained and sufficient, that the spiritual community is breaking up. This is, along with some other features, the perfect literary situation.

Allen Tate has observed : "Miss Dickinson and John Donne would have this in common : their sense of the natural world is not blunted by a too rigid system of ideas ; yet the ideas, the abstractions, their education or their intellectual heritage, are not so weak as to let their immersion in nature, or their purely personal quality, get out of control. The two poles of the mind are not separately visible ; we infer them from the lucid tension that may be most readily illustrated by polar activity. There is no thought as such at all ; nor is there feeling ; there is that unique focus of experience which is at once neither and both". Personal revelation of the kind that Donne and Emily Dickinson strove for, in the effort to understand their relation to the world, is a feature of all great poetry ; it is probably the hidden motive for writing.

"Imagism" was a poetic movement that flourished in England, and even more vigorously in America, between the years 1912 and 1917. It was organized by a group of English and American writers in London, partly under the influence of the poetic theory of T.E. Hulme, as a revolt against what Ezra Pound called the "rather blurry, messy......sentimentalistic mannerism" poetry at the turn of the century. Ezra Pound, the first leader of the movement, was soon succeeded by Amy Lowell and others. The Imagist claims, as voiced by Amy Lowell in her Preface to the first of three anthologies called *Some Imagist Poets*, declared for a poetry which, abandoning conventional poetic materials and versification, is free to choose any subject and to create its own rhythms, is expressed in common speech, and presents an image that is hard, clear, and concentrated. The typical Imagist poem is written in *free verse*, and undertakes to render as exactly and tersely as possible, without comment or generalization, the writer's response to a visual object or scene ; often the impression is rendered by means of metaphor, or by juxtaposing a description of one object with that of a second and diverse object. This famed example by Ezra Pound exceeds all Imagist poems in the degree of its concentration :

IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition of these faces in the crowd ;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Considering Emily Dickinson as an Imagist, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant observes : "For starkness of vision, 'quintessentialness' of expression, boldness and solidity of thought, and freedom of form, a New England spinster who flourished between 1830 and 1886 in an elm-shaded college town above the Connecticut valley, might give the imagists 'pointers' : here is a [illegible] the modern

New England heart. ...To me she is one of the rarest flowers the sterner New England ever bore, and justifies, as Carlyle justified his narrow Scotch inheritance—there is a curious analogy between his prose and her nubbly elliptical verse—the stiff-necked Puritan elders from whom we all sprang. For without those elders and their family Bibles, and the mystical marriage of the absolute and the homely which was the very essence of their minds and hours, Emily Dickinson could never have been on such friendly, not to say familiar terms with God, or sported so whimsically and so stupendously with the mysteries of living and dying. The peculiar quality of her short concentrated poems is that they bring infinity and eternity within a village hedge ; and to her, as to the early Puritan, the great earthly experience was poignantly individual.

There is no doubt that Emily Dickinson's poems are remarkable for their condensation, their vividness of image, their delicate or pungent satire and irony, their childlike responsiveness to experience, their subtle feeling for nature, their startling abruptness in dealing with themes commonly regarded as trite, their excellence in imaginative insight and still greater excellence in fancy. Typical is such a poem as that in which she celebrates the happiness of a little stone on the road, or that in which she remarks with gleeful irony upon the dignity that burial has in store for each of us--coach and footmen, belles in the village, "as we ride grand along". Emily Dickinson takes up to strange places ; one never knows what is in store. But always she is penetrating and dainty, both intimate and aloof, challenging lively thought on our part while remaining, herself, a charmingly elfish mystery.

As for her affinity with the moderns, it can safely be said that her vision is, basically, the vision of modern man, as, certainly, it is the vision recorded in a great deal of modern poetry. After Emily Dickinson, two of the major poets of the twentieth century have been New Englanders : Frost, and Eliot. Both have inherited pretty much the world-view that Emily Dickinson propounded, and each has written out of the view, making it central to his own poetic themes. For Frost, the trick has lain in sealing up every conceivable chink in such an ironic armour as Emily Dickinson wore. As aware as she that life has the power to terrify, Frost has sought the means of parrying fear--and found them in the quip, the jest, the wry grin, the sardonic countenance. He has substituted for Emily's policy of not crying until it hurts too much what seems the steadfast determination never to feel pain and not to cry at all. Eliot, by contrast, has made no attempt to shut out the issues "The sea is all about us", he laments, meaning, as Emily Dickinson had meant, that man is adrift on a flood of moral and intellectual uncertainties. Time for Eliot, though less the personified demon, than it had been in Emily Dickinson's poetry, is no less the source of confusion and disorder.

Emily Dickinson [illegible] therefore, at a crucial turning in the [illegible] the old, outmoded systems [illegible] their placid way that life is merely a finite enactment of the Infinite. Before her lies a situation in which the Infinite seems to have disappeared—or in which, if Infinity can be demonstrated at all, the demonstration is a result of long and arduous effort. In her poetry the easy way breaks up, and the difficult way begins to crystallize. By the very questions she asks, the transition from the one to the other is made necessary. Emily Dickinson is one of those writers who cause us to see, with renewed understanding the literature that comes both before and after them. She remains one of ours, because her attitudes break with 'theirs', and continue to shape—in fact, continue to be our own.

Emily Dickinson shares the appeal of poets who create their own techniques, moulding language to the requirements of their personal voice without regard to literary convention. The appeal is heightened in her case because she was so little aware of the literary significance of what she was doing, with the result that her crudities were not of the deliberate kind which so often mar the work of more self-conscious rebels. Her originality and uniqueness were to a large extent the natural flowering of her poetic personality.

Q. 33. Write a critical note on Emily Dickinson's ironic style.

Or

Q. 34. "In Emily Dickinson's poetry irony functions as a constant and pervasive theme, and, inevitably, the ironic outlook came to affect her poetic style". Discuss.

Or

Q. 35. "Emily Dickinson shied away from rhetorical devices because most forms of the rhetorical were totally at odds with her ironic patterns of thought". Elaborate and illustrate.

Or

Q. 36. "Emily Dickinson's ironical sensibility is also manifested in certain of the strictly formal features of her poetry". Do you agree ?

Ans. For Emily Dickinson, irony never acted as a deterrent to creativity, but rather as a positive and compelling spur. Always anxious to keep her guard in place, Emily Dickinson adapted method to attitude and developed what might appropriately be termed an ironical aesthetic. It is out of this aesthetic that there evolve the language and structure, the tone and wit, which are the hallmarks in much of her most interesting poetry. Sometimes, for instance, Emily Dickinson achieves ironic effects through a calculatedly ambiguous image, or through the use of descriptive touches which seem to invite one sort of interpretation but then turn out to resist it vigorously. This technique, though easily managed, actually serves a two-fold purpose. It makes the poem ironic at its own expense : that is, it adds unexpected richness and density to a given context. It likewise provokes wariness in the reader, thus guarding against the 'heresy of inattention', which, in her own way, Emily Dickinson would have found fully as objectionable as did that other supreme ironist, Henry James.

It is in connection with her ironical aesthetic that we can possibly come to terms with the most distinguishing quality of Emily Dickinson's style, which is her deliberate suppression of rhetorical forms : her preference for the austere, laconic, carefully guarded utterances that can be described only as non-rhetorical. Or better than merely explaining it, perhaps we can defend this tendency in her work, since among Emily Dickinson's detractors it is the one that excites the greatest amount of adverse comment. The case against her in this respect is notorious. Her poetry suffers, the critics have often insisted, because it is too terse, too threadbare, too inveterately lacking in the niceties of adornament and refinement. Even in her most powerful lyrics, they claim, these deficiencies make themselves felt, resulting in a certain monotony of expression, a spareness and want of polish that are usually objectionable.

On nearly every page, Emily Dickinson presents the short, cramped line, the crabbed and cryptic phrase, the equivocal question, the flat and the unembellished statement. Plainness in diction, a hesitant and hence involuted syntax, a studious avoidance of ornamentation, a cautiously subdued tone : these are the recurring features in her poetry. The relative absence from her work of rhetorical flourishes is a testament to her complete honesty, as, in the final analysis, it may constitute one mark of her greatness as an artist. For in lyric poetry, where the speaking voice is likely to be that of the poet himself, rhetoric is the language of involvement. It is the substance of panegyrics and amorous avowals ; it bears the weight of the personal credo ; it enters into bald declarations of affirmation or denial. On the whole, Emily Dickinson shied away from rhetorical devices because most forms of the rhetorical were totally at odds with her ironic pattern of thought. Trapped in a world which declined to be committed, she saw that any avowal suggesting her commitment to it would be a confession of naivete and, much more seriously, a jeopardizing of the poise and security that indifference alone could afford. Hence just as Emily Dickinson, the composer of ironic themes, remonstrated against overly grand expectations, so Emily Dickinson, the ironic stylist, remained chary of making statements that were likely to seem overly sweeping, overly passionate, or merely overwrought. Emily Dickinson's drab and narrow language was not, as has been asserted, the product of an insensitive ear or of a constitutional awkwardness with words. Her language sprang, instead, from her conviction that in a world characterised by manifold uncertainties, the only viable speech would be a terse and astringent speech—the speech of careful, quiet inconclusiveness.

In our time we have been attuned to the poetry of John Donne, and to the harshness, the verbal incongruities, the strained and convoluted syntax which are its chief stylistic components. We realize that Donne's peculiarities of style served as the exact reflectors of his philosophical position. Far from being personal idiosyncrasies, his stylistic mannerisms registered the profound sense he had of the disorder and the incoherency in the world around him. And with Emily Dickinson, the background for a style is remarkably similar. To expect that she would, or could, write prettily ; to assume that she might remain within the bounds of a conventional, nineteenth-century lyric eloquence—this is to presume for Emily Dickinson a view of experience which she was never prepared to muster. It is on the basis of what she did see that her writing has to be comprehended, and on that basis the principal stylistic modes open to her can be defined rather readily.

They involved a sort of studied ugliness : an attempt to record the treacheries of experience by the blunt antithesis, the guttural expression, the abrupt break in meaning, the barbarous lapse from rhyme. They involved the logical contradiction and the apparently inept word : qualities which reflected Emily Dickinson's sense of a tangled and indecipherable reality. And they involved dryness, reticence, and understatement : qualities that satisfied her need to be uncommitted and inconspicuous. One and all, these were the mannerisms best suited to Emily Dickinson's vision of man's difficult place in a difficult world. If, as poetic technique, her way of writing can offend the eye or rasp angrily in the ear, the way was nonetheless essential to the poet. The reader seeing that in her work style is the measure of content and that both were of prime importance to the way of life which she adopted.

To the extent that Emily Dickinson did regularly resort to rhetorical forms, she drew upon devices which, again, would embody her ironical perspective. Like Donne, for example, she was inordinately fond of the paradox, which she used, as he did, to express the fundamental disharmonies of life. Observe, in isolation, a half dozen of her paradoxical utterances :

> Success—is counted sweetest
> By those who ne'er succeed……
>
> A *Wounded* Deer—leaps highest—
> I've heard the Hunter tell—
>
> To learn the Transport — by the Pain—
> As Blind Men learn the Sun……
>
> Just lost—when I was saved……
> We lose—because we win—
>
> Tell all the Truth—but tell it slant—
> Success in Circuit lies—

In each instance, paradox derives from the way in which antithetical concepts or experiences have been yoked together into a meaningful, if bitter, perception. The ideas stated are basically tragic; from the standpoint of a sentimentalist they would seem unnerving and therefore repellent. Yet they catch precisely the spirit of irony, for they have enunciated with force and lucidity the ironist's recognition of how disparity and contradiction rule human experience.

Emily Dickinson extends paradox through an entire poem, the tensions of thought which she begets can frequently be astonishing. Thus in the full text from which the first quotation was taken, complexity is the result of a deft steering between two extreme views. Avoiding the purely logical proposition, which says that success is best comprehended by the successful, Emily Dickinson likewise remains aloof from the sentimental truism: "success in failure" or "sweet are the uses of adversity". The point she makes is that the *idea* of success will be most poignantly real to those who have been denied the actuality. It is a bleak, complicated, and paradoxical truth— one which none save the ironical intelligence could possibly have formulated.

It is, then, largely through a wry poetic diction that Emily Dickinson's ironies are conveyed: through the single off-key word, or through a series of such words, joined together into the equivocal passage. It remains, however, to speak of how her ironical sensibility is also manifested in certain of the strictly formal features of her poetry. Perhaps the chief of these would be the short, epigrammatic line. What a short poetic line tends to preclude, of course, are the expansiveness and looseness which we associate with the rhetorician. The short line is ordinarily not an ideal vehicle for grandiose assertions; tense and pithy, it is admirably suited for holding in balance the contrarieties and dissonances which are aspects of an ironical style.

Finally, one suspects that her determination to be ironic will, in some measure, explain the strange habits of punctuation that Emily Dickinson employed. Largely expurgated by the early editors, her irregularities along this line have come to light only with the publication of Thomas Johnson's variorum text. They persist through all the poetry, the ironic and the non-ironic equally, so that elsewhere certain of them will have to be dealt with in a different fashion But a cursory reading will indicate that Emily Dickinson's favourite marking was the dash, which she used copiously as a substitute for commas, semicolons, and periods, and that her standard practice was to leave the final line of the poem dash-stopped or completely open-ended. About the kinship to an ironic style of both these practices, little real doubt can exist.

What the dash alone accomplishes is a keen sharpening of Emily Dickinson's antitheses. It points up the paradoxical quality in her writing, sets off and thereby dramatizes the ambiguous word, acts to underscore the doubleness that is latent in many of her themes. In conjunction with the dash-stopped or unstopped last line, furthermore, the dash creates in the poetry a certain fragmentary effect, a sense of the broken and unfinished—in brief, just that air of sustained and intentional inconclusiveness which Emily Dickinson's viewpoint required. When taken together, these markings do either or both of two things. They help to set forth a world that is far too erratic and disordered to permit deep human engagements. Or they become integral parts of the only prudent and feasible response to that world, which, as they help to demonstrate, is the open, the suspended, the carefully divided response. For all their lack of conventionality, the markings are usually functional rather than mere oddities. Like every other device discussed here, they tend to be the highly conscious contrivances of a highly self-conscious ironic artist.

Q. 37. What did Emily Dickinson mean when she said that her business was Circumference ? Elaborate your answer with suitable illustrations.

Or

Q. 38. "Circumference represented the farthest boundary of human experience, where two modes of being touched, where that which was circle pressed that which was beyond". Apply this statement to Emily Dickinson's concept of Circumference.

Or

Q. 39. "In the complexity of its operation Circumference could perform the complementary functions of extension and enclosure, of release from self and determination of self". Elucidate with reference to Emily Dickinson's use of the term 'Circumference'.

Or

Q. 40 "To explore *Circumference* would be at once to explore her own unknown limits and to explore the mysteries of life and death, of Immortality and the Possible, of finite, existence immersed in the infinite; to explore these mysteries by means of intuition and poetic imagination, the only way, she was sure, they could profitably be explored". Discuss with reference to Emily Dickinson's poetry.

Ans. "Circumference" is a word to which Emily Dickinson returned again and again. It is a pervasive image in her religious thinking and in her theory of art, though the meanings it carries are not always consistent. An exploration of its ambiguities seems in order. Significantly, she rarely used the kindred word 'circle' with its suggestion of a bounded inclosure. Her term was usually 'circumference', occasionally its synonym 'circuit', both compounded from Latin roots meaning to carry or go around. The emphasis is on the motion of encompassing, suggesting an extension outward to include something larger than can be found at a particular static point. It is close to the meaning now rare but copiously illustrated in the *Religio Medici* of Sir Thomas Browne, an author she specifically named as a favourite. In his effort to define it as a sense of boundlessness radiating out from a centre, opposite to the normal sense of a limiting circle, he cited the formulation of Hermes : The sphere of which the centre is everywhere, the circumference nowhere. Though Browne frequently limited 'circumference' to the immediately surrounding environment, she began with this rare use and expanded it into a symbol for all that is outside. Her centre is the inquiring mind whose business is circumference, intent upon exploring the whole infinity of the universe that lies before her.

At times 'circumference' seems associated with the idea of cosmic expanse, as opposed to the limited life centered on earth. 'A Coffin—is a small Domain', she says, yet it contains 'A Citizen of Paradise'; and realization of this larger meaning of mortality can become the rudiment of a new apprehension, ampler than the sun's, 'Circumference without Relief-/ Or Estimate or End.' Again, expansion outward from the narrow centre of death, the coming full circle of the individual spirit, will occur at the Resurrection, when the fragmented earthly life is made whole at last and 'Circumstance be full.' Even in life, according to another poem, she could sometimes have a vision of touching the Universe and see herself as a lone "Speck upon a Ball' going out to 'Circumference', but the vision was a transient one and quickly receded. These certainly suggest the meaning of circumference as attainment of the divine reality.

Ultimate circumference may well be the extension of understanding from mortal limits to absolute fulfilment in immortality. But the image is more complex for her, even involute, and there are circumferences short of the celestial one that are not beyond the poet's reach. There are endless expansions for the spirit, opening out from the smallest centre of consciousness to the fullest comprehension. But this growth cannot be attained too easily; it is more likely to be achieved through the vision and discipline of art than in the experience of life. The ecstasy of perfect love, she says in one poem, is a 'new Circumference' too exalted for mortals, conditioned as they are by the 'little Circuit' of ordinary life. Starting from these two concentric images, she goes on to develop her theme that the human way must go through pain and suffering to a fuller understanding of what heaven can be. It is only by encompassing the full circle of human possibilities that one is made ready to expand towards the divine circle. How grand the expansion can be even within limits of the mortal calendar leads her to exclaim in another poem : 'Time feels so vast' her finite self tends to become engrossed in 'this Circumference' to the exclusion of God. The poem concludes that this life is only a preface to eternity, preparing her by stages of growth 'For the Stupendous Vision/ Of His Diameters'.

To couch her theory of art in religious terms was natural for one formed by such an environment. In her thinking the Creator became a model for the poet. The circumference of divine reality perceived through awe was at least a useful metaphor for the heaven-on-earth of his art achieved through the imagination. This linkage is made explicit in a quatrain written near the end of her life. Unsuccessful as a poem, its meaning is obscure without the accompanying letter, sent to the sculptor Daniel Chester French. She was writing to congratulate him for winning his fame (his momentary achievement of Circumference) 'reverently', and since success is dust she begged God to keep him 'fundamental' so he could achieve it again. The verses themselves are addressed to 'Circumference', who is properly the 'Bride of Awe' and so can be possessed only by the truly 'hallowed Knight'. Even then, possessed just momentarily in his art, she apparently means, since all is a metaphor for the artist's dedicated love of his Muse. Only so does he achieve occasionally the revelation of full meaning.

The most startling use of the term occurs in a late letter : 'The Bible dealt with the Centre, not with the Circumference'. This pronouncement is not so much baffling as unexpectedly bold. Set beside her own boast, 'My Business is Circumference', it seems little short of blasphemous. Her poems are to accomplish something the Bible does not ? Is she saying it is just a human record, the history of a religious people and a rule book for conduct, whereas her poetry will encompass revelation ? She certainly searched the Bible for meaning, but though she found it a primary source for her imagery—most significantly in its most poetic books, the Psalms, the Revelation, and the Gospel of St. John—she did not find in it the divine reality.

Through Emerson she was well aware of the Transcendentalists' doctrine that all books, including The Book, are secondary to the fountain of truth within, and she could go so far with them as to affirm 'By intuition Mightiest Things/ Assert themselves—and not by terms.' But her kinship with her predecessors is more tenuous than with her successors, especially some of the aesthetic philosophers today. At any rate, like many modern poets she found art the substitute for her inherited religion, the only instrument of revelation left to her. Does she come then at last to contradict her poem 'Of Bronze—and Blaze', which says it is spiritual pride to aim at celestial beauty since the poet's mortal lot is to make splendours out of menagerie ? Perhaps all can be reconciled in a sort of dialectical sequence. The immediate leap into God is impossible, the poet cannot be like the aurora. He must go back to the earth, the human experience of pain and suffering, and work out from there towards the divine reality. She, also, may have to deal with the centre, as the Bible does, though her ultimate business is to explore out to the circumference.

'Circumference' was also Emily Dickinson's most frequent metaphor for ecstasy. Each of the negotiations which consciousness conducted between the me and the not-me established a circumference, but Circumference in this exalted sense carried special connotations. The circle had long been a symbol for the spirit in activity, but with great, almost contradictory, differences in its significance through the centuries. Jonathan Edwards, an eighteenth-century New England Christian, reasoned that as the universe of heavenly bodies operated in a system of wheels within wheels, and as the earth shaped its natural cycles in circular courses, "so it is in the course of things in God's providence over the intelligent and moral world, all is the motion of wheels." On all orders of existence creation was the sublime machine, and in the grand scheme of Newtonian physics the rotation of a given wheel mattered only as it contributed to the intricate design of the orderly whole. For Edwards, as "the wheels of a WATCH or a CLOCK move contrary one to another... yet all serve the intent of the workman to show the time", so by extension the workings of God's creation in the moral order and the spiritual life "centre in the purpose of God the great creator of all things." The central purpose was cosmic in dimension and controlled the turning of the individual wheels. In all these spheres of activity a careful distinction had to be maintained : "There is a progress towards a certain fixed issue of things, and every revolution brings nearer to that issue, as it is in the motion of a wheel upon the earth or in the motion of the wheels of a chariot, and not like the motion of a wheel on its axis, for if so, its motion would be vain..." In spirit as in matter each wheel revolved towards its appointed end. Emerson agreed with the promise that "Unit and Universe are round", but for him, instead of functioning in the absolute plan of the cosmic clockworks, each man rather made the universe bend to coherent shape around himself, so that in Edwards' terms he made the wheel turn vainly on itself. Not at all in vain, Emerson and Thoreau insisted repeatedly, because the soul did expand from the turning centre to orient the cosmos to itself : "This is the key to the power of the greatest men,—their spirit diffuses itself. A new quality travels by night and by day, in concentric circles from its origin..."; "We should not walk on tiptoe, but healthily expand to our full circumference on the soles of our feet." In this metaphor "the eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end... Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn".

Emily Dickinson was at first fearful lest the "minute Circumference/ Of a single Brain" be engrossed in its "Finity", but she soon learned in the moment of ecstasy that she was "the Vital Axle" for a wheeling cosmos. There are numerous poems about the airy dilation of the expansive consciousness as it "Went out upon Circumference—/ Beyond the Dip of Bell." She was never to lose completely the sense of her insignificance ; the poems keep coming back to the paradox of her bigness and her diminutiveness. However, at moments the smallest event—like the grain of sand which comprehended all things, like Walden Pond which mingled the waters of the world, like Whitman's gathering on the Brooklyn Ferry—could sustain in a miraculous sphere the furthest reaches of space and the fulness of human existence : "Behold how great a firmament/ Accompanies a Star" ; "Existence's whole Arc, filled up/ With one small Diadem."

In several of her poems Circumference marked the line between "Place" and "Presence", between "Firmament below" and "Firmament above." Circumference represented the farthest boundary of human experience, where two modes of being touched, where that which was circle pressed that which was beyond. At the same time, Circumference also marked the "terminus" of human delimitation. The doubleness of the metaphor—extension and limit—makes an important point, for in Dickinson, as in Emerson and Thoreau, eternity and infinity and God Himself can best be taken as the encircling infinity into which the individual may expand in accordance with his inner capacity. In its various contexts and multiple associations Circumference comes to serve as a complex symbol for those disrupted moments when in some sense time transcends time. Circumference signifies ecstasy in its expansiveness, in its self-contained wholeness, in its self-ordered coherence, in its definition of the individual's capacity for being (and for Being). For the duration of the ecstasy, at least, man seems a "Finite Infinity", and God's "larger Glory" seems "for the less/ A just sufficient Ring."

Conversely, Circumference acts too as an indispensable defence perimeter which separates man from God and "secures Eternity/ From presenting—Here." Edwards believed that ecstasy was possible for man only through God-given concentricity with Himself ; for he believed with St. Augustine that personality found its reference point not in an impersonal All-Centre, which was Emerson's vague absolute, but in the very Person of the Deity. Emily Dickinson found her God incomprehensible as a Person ; He was faceless, indeterminate—and hence menacing. Exposure threatened the integrity and identity of the individual by opening him to obliteration by the Absolute, to engulfment by anonymous Being. In self-defence Emily Dickinson came to see Circumference not simply as the limits of possibility but as the positive protection against "Mortal Abolition." As far as she could tell, she could only be Emily Dickinson within the circle of : "that revolving reason/ Whose esoteric belt Protects our sanity" from blank and inhuman Infinitude, "Whose Amplitude no need invades—/ Whose Axis never comes."

In the complexity of its operation Circumference could perform the complementary functions of extension and enclosure, of release from self and determination of self. Moreover, Circumference's "Processes of Size" ended in cessation of movement, which fixed, for the instant anyway, its own limits : "When Cogs—stop—that's Circumference—/ The Ultimate—of Wheels." The poetry employs related images for Circumference : the crown, the pearl, the horizon, the disc, the arc of the bird's flight, the sheen of the noon sun. In most cases there is the same connotation of bounded breadth, of concrete dimension :"For sheen must have a disk/ To be a sun", just as consciousness must have a body to be a person.

44

Chronology of Important Dates

1830	Emily Dickinson born December 10, in Amherst, Massachusetts, the second child of Edward and Emily Dickinson.
1840	Moved from homestead on Main Street to a new residence. Portrait painted.
1840—1847	Attended Amherst Academy.
1846	Deeply affected by a winter religious revival, but failed to convert.
1847	Graduated from Amherst Academy after six years of irregular attendance.
1847—1848	Attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary at South Hadley, Massachusetts. Underwent a severe religious crisis in January, but again remained unconverted. Only known photograph taken.
1848—1849	Came under the influence of Ben Newton who widened her reading interests and encouraged her poetic ambitions.
1850	Earliest publication : prose valentine in Amherst Undergraduate magazine, *The Indicator*.
1852	Her first poem, a mock valentine, published in the *Springfield Republican*, February 20. Father elected to Congress.
1855	Spent January and February in Washington and March in Philadelphia. Presumably heard Reverend Charles Wadsworth preach in Philadelphia. Family moved back to old house on Main Street.
1856	Brother Austin married Sue Gilbert, a close friend, July 1.

1858	Began the most creative period of her life. Wrote more than fifty poems during the year and assembled them in fair copies. Drafted first "Master" letter, relating to someone she loved. Formed friendship with Samuel Bowles, editor of the *Springfield Republican*.
1860	Visited by Reverend Charles Wadsworth early in the year.
1861	"The May-Wine" ("I taste a liquor never brewed") published in the *Springfield Republican* on May 4. Drafted two other "Master" letters.
1862	Underwent a great emotional crisis during the winter, possibly associated with Charles Wadsworth's departure to Calvary Church in San Francisco, California or Samuel Bowles' trip to Europe. "The Sleeping" ("Safe in their Alabaster Chambers") published in the *Springfield Republican* on March 1. Wrote 366 poems during the year. Initiated correspondence with Thomas W. Higginson on April 15, seeking literary advice. By June, determined to remain a private poet, she gradually withdrew from society. Autumn-trouble with her eyes.
1863—1865	Wrote nearly 400 poems.
1864	"My Sabbath" (Some keep the Sabbath going to Church") published in *The Round Table* on March 12 ; and "Sunset" ("Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple") published in the *Springfield Republican* on March 30. Went to Boston for eye treatment.
1866	"The Snake" ("A narrow Fellow in the Grass") published in the *Springfield Republican* on Feb. 14. Ended her main creative period, after composing over 1000 poems in eight years.
1869	Reverend Charles Wadsworth returns to Philadelphia.
1870	Visited by Thomas W. Higginson on August 16. Her poetic interests were renewed in the early 1870s and she wrote nearly 200 poems.
1873	Second and last visit of Thomas W. Higginson on December 3. Began friendship with Helen Hunt Jackson.

1874	Father died on June 16. Turned to an old family friend, Judge Otis Lord, for consolation. Entered into complete seclusion.
1875	Mother paralyzed.
1876	Helen Hunt Jackson called, October 10.
1877—1884	Friendship with Judge Otis Lord developed into a love attachment after the death of Lord's wife. Considered marriage, but the care of her invalid mother and his ill-health prevented it.
1878	Samuel Bowles died. At the suggestion of Helen Hunt Jackson "Success" ("Success is counted sweetest") published in an anonymous volume, *A Masque of Poets.*
1880	Visited by Charles Wadsworth for the last time, during the summer.
1881	Josiah Gilbert Holland died, October 12.
1882	Charles Wadsworth died in April, and her mother in November.
1883	The death of her favourite nephew, Gilbert Dickinson, deeply affected her.
1884	After the death of Judge Otis Lord in March, suffered a nervous collapse.
1885	Ill during the fall and confined to bed. Helen Hunt Jackson died, August 12. Emily's illness severe in November.
1886	Died on May 15 at the age of fifty-five. Her sister Lavinia burned most of her correspondence but saved the poems.
1890	First edition of her poetry published, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas W. Higginson. For the next sixty years relatives and friends published selections from her poems.
1955	Complete edition of her poems published in three volumes by Thomas H. Johnson.
1958	Complete edition of her letters published in three volumes by Thomas H. Johnson.

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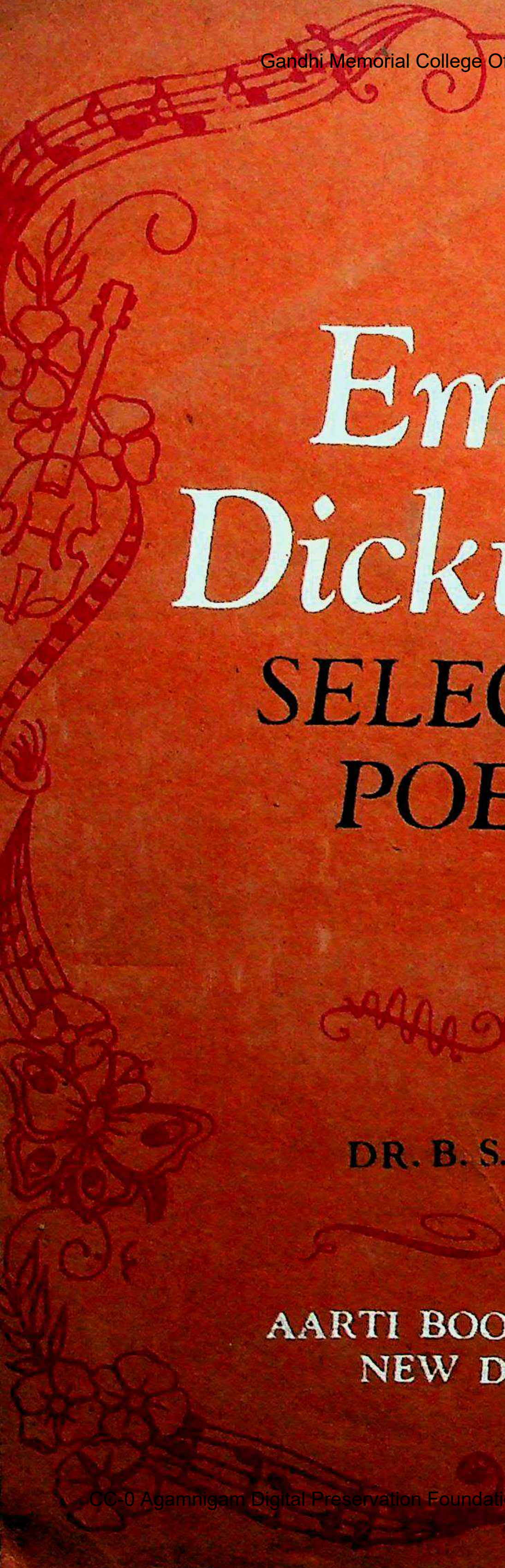
Predman Krishen Dhar
M.A. (Pol. Sc. Eco. Eng. Hist.) B.Ed.
Motiyar Rainawari
SRINAGER-190003
KASHMIR

G.M. College of Education
Raipur, Bantalab
Jammu.
Acc. No....2373 (D)
Dated ...1/11 2016



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SELECTED POEMS

DR. B. S. GOYAL

AARTI BOOK CENTRE
NEW DELHI-8